OUTLAWS OF THE MARSH

BY SHI NAI'AN AND LUO GUANZHONG

TRANSLATED BY SIDNEY SHAPIRO

The Outlaws of the Marsh

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Chapter 1
Zhang the Divine Teacher Prays to Dispel a Plague
Marshal Hong Releases Demons by Mistake

After Five Dynasties' turmoil and strife,

The clouds dispersed and revealed the sky,

Refreshing rain brought old trees new life,

Culture and learning once again were high.

Ordinary folk in the lanes wore silk,

Music drifted from mansions and towers,

Under the heavens all was serene,

Men dozed off at noon midst gay birds and flowers.

This eight-lined poem was written during the reign of Emperor Shen Zong of the Song Dynasty by a scholar named Shao Yaofu, also known as Master Kang Jie. From the end of the Tang and all through the Five Dynasties, times had been troubled. One short-lived dynasty had ruled after another. How true was the verse:

Zhu, Li, Shi, Liu, Guo founded

Liang, Tang, Jin, Han and Zhou.

Fifteen emperors fifty years in a row,

Bringing hardship, tumult and woe.

In time, the way of Heaven took a new turn. At Jiamaying, Tai Zu, the Emperor of Military Virtue, was born. A red glow suffused the sky when this sage came into the world, and fragrance still filled the air the following morning. He was in fact the God of Thunder descended to earth. Brave and magnanimous, he was superior to any emperor who had ever lived.

With a staff as tall as himself he smote so hard that four hundred prefectures and districts acknowledged his sovereignty. He swept the land clean and pacified the Central Plains. Naming his empire the Great Song, he established his court at Bianliang. Tai Zu was the first of eighteen Song emperors and founder of a dynasty lasting four hundred years.

That is why Master Shao Yaofu said in his praise: *The clouds dispersed and revealed the sky.* For the people it was indeed like seeing the sun again.

At that time on Huashan, the West Sacred Mountain, lived a Taoist hermit named Chen Tuan. A virtuous man, he could foretell the future by the weather. One day as he was riding his donkey down the mountain towards the county town of Huayin he heard a traveler on the path say: “Emperor Chai Shi Zong has surrendered his throne to Marshal Zhao in the Eastern Capital.”

Chen clapped his hands to his brow and laughed so delightedly that he fell off his donkey. Asked the reason for his joy, he said: “The empire will be firmly settled from now on. For this is in accord with the will of Heaven above, the laws of Earth below, and the hearts of men between.”

Marshal Zhao accepted the abdication in 960 and established his regime. He ruled for seventeen years, and there was peace throughout the land. He was succeeded by his younger brother, Tai Zong, who ruled for twenty-two years. After Tai Zong came Zhen Zong, who was succeeded by Ren Zong.

Emperor Ren Zong was actually a re-incarnation of the Barefoot Immortal. When he came down and was born on earth he cried day and night without cease. The imperial court posted a proclamation, inviting any man who could cure him to come forward. Heaven was touched and sent the Great Star of White Gold in the guise of an old man. Announcing he could cure the prince's weeping, the old man took down the proclamation. The officer in charge conducted him to the palace, where the emperor directed that he be allowed to see Ren Zong in the inner apartments.

The old man went in, picked up the baby, and whispered eight words into his ear. At once the prince stopped crying. The old man disappeared in a puff of air without even revealing his name. What were the eight words? They were these: *“Civil and military affairs, both have their stars.”*

The fact was that the Jade Emperor of Heaven had dispatched two stars from the Propitious Constellation to serve the future emperor. The civil affairs star became Bao Zheng, prefect of Kaifeng and a senior member of the Dragon Diagram Academy. The military affairs star became Di Qing,

the great general who led an expedition against the Kingdom of Western Xia.

With the help of these two ministers, Ren Zong ruled as emperor for forty-two years, in the course of which he gave special names to nine periods of his reign. During the first nine years, or the Tian Sheng period, all went well. Grain harvests were large; the people were happy at their work; no one kept articles lost by others on the road; doors were left unlocked at night. That was the period of the “First Abundance.”

From the beginning of the Ming Dao period to the third year of Huang You another nine years of prosperity followed. That was the period of “Second Abundance.”

From the fourth year of Huang You to the second year of Jia You, nine years more, the fields continued to flourish. That was the period of the “Third Abundance.”

These three nine-year periods, twenty-seven years in all, were known as the Era of Three Abundances. During that time the people enjoyed great happiness. Who could have foreseen that extreme joy would give birth to sorrow?

In the third year of the Jia You period a plague struck the land. From the south to the two capitals, not a single hamlet escaped the contagion. The imperial court was snowed under with petitions for relief from every district and prefecture.

More than half the soldiers and residents in and around the Eastern Capital died. Bao Zheng, counsellor and prefect of Kaifeng, published the officially approved prescriptions and spent his own money on medicines in an attempt to save the people. But to no avail. The plague grew worse. All the high civil and military officials conferred. The they gathered in the Hall of the Water Clock and waited for daybreak, when court would be held, so that they could appeal to the emperor.

That day, the third day of the third month of the third year of the Jia You period, at the third interval of the fifth watch Emperor Ren Zong mounted

his throne in the imperial palace. After the officials had made their obeisances, the chief of ceremonies cried: “If anyone has a petition, let him come forward. If there are none, this court will adjourn.”

Zhao Zhe, the Premier, and Wen Yanbo, his deputy, advanced and said: “The plague is raging unabated in the capital. Victims among the soldiers and the people are many. We hope Your Majesty, in a forgiving and benevolent spirit, will reduce prison sentences and cut taxes, and pray to Heaven that the people be relived of this affliction.”

The emperor at once ordered the Hanlin Academy to draw an edict proclaiming a general amnesty for all prisoners and canceling all taxes. He also directed that every temple and monastery in the capital offer prayers for a termination of the disaster.

But the plague only became worse. The emperor was very disturbed and summoned his officials for a conference. A prominent minister stepped forth and asked to be heard ahead of turn. The emperor saw that it was Fan Zhongyan, his Deputy Premier.

Fan kowtowed, then rose and said: “The plague is decimating our soldiers and citizenry. No one is safe. In my humble opinion if this pestilence is to be ended Your Majesty should summon the Divine Teacher of the Taoists, who comes from a papal line dating back to Han times. Let him travel day and night and rush here to the capital and conduct a great prayer service in the imperial park. In this way the people will be saved.”

Emperor Ren Zong approved Fan's proposal. He directed the scholars of the Hanlin Academy to draw up an edict, which he signed personally, and issued a bunch of royal incense sticks. He ordered that Marshal Hong Xin go as his emissary to the Dragon and Tiger Mountain in Xinzhou Prefecture of Jiangxi Province and fetch Zhang the Divine Teacher. While incense burned in the imperial hall, the emperor himself placed the edict in Marshal Hong's hands and told him to set out immediately.

Hong accepted the royal edict and took leave of the emperor. With the edict in a bag on his back and the incense sticks in a golden box, he mounted his

horse and left the Eastern Capital, leading a column of several score men. They headed directly for Guixi, a county town in Xinzhou Prefecture.

After a number of days they arrived. Officials, high and low, greeted Marshal Hong. They sent word to the abbot and other Taoists in the Temple of Supreme Purity on the Dragon and Tiger Mountain to get ready to receive the imperial edict.

The next day the officials accompanied Marshal Hong to the foot of the mountain. A procession of Taoists, beating drums and bells, playing saintly music, bearing incense and candles, banners and canopies, came down to receive the imperial envoy. They escorted him to the temple, where he dismounted. All of the Taoists, from the abbot to the lowliest novice, gathered round and led him to the Hall of Three Purities. They asked him to place the royal edict on an altar.

“Where is the Divine Teacher?” Marshal Hong inquired of the abbot.

“You must understand, Marshal,” replied the abbot, “our Teacher is known as 'Pure Serenity'. He is of a very exalted nature and cannot be bothered with such mundane matters as welcoming and seeing off visitors. He has built a thatched hut on the top of the mountain, and there he meditates and cultivates his spirit.”

“But I have an imperial edict. How can I find him?”

“Leave the edict here in this hall. None of us will dare to unroll it. Please come into the abbey for some tea. We can talk things over there.”

Marshal Hong did as the abbot suggested. When he had seated himself amid his hosts in the abbey, tea and meatless dishes of many varieties were served. After the meal, the marshal said to the abbot: “You say the Divine Teacher is in a thatched hut on the mountain top. Why not ask him to come down and receive the royal edict?”

“He's up there, all right, keeping himself aloof from the world. But our Divine Teacher has an unusual knowledge of the Way. He can ride the

clouds and mists. Nobody knows exactly where he is. We ordinary Taoists are rarely able to see him. How can we ask him to come down?”

“I must meet him. A plague is raging in the capital and the emperor has sent me with an imperial edict and royal incense to invite him to conduct a great prayer service that will dispel the pestilence and save the people. What can I do?”

“You must first prove your piety. Eat no meat, bathe and change into simple cotton garments. With the edict on your back, carry burning incense and travel on foot alone to the summit. There, kowtow, and cry your invitation aloud. Then perhaps you'll be able to meet the Divine Teacher. But if you're not sincere your trip will be in vain. You'll never see him.”

“I've eaten nothing but vegetables since I left the capital. Doesn't that show I'm sincere? I shall do as you say. I'll start up the mountain the first thing in the morning.”

Everyone retired for the night.

At the fifth watch the following morning the Taoists prepared scented water and a vegetarian meal for the marshal. After bathing in the scented water he dressed in new cotton garments and straw sandals, ate the meatless breakfast, wrapped the imperial edict in a piece of yellow silk and tied it on his back. In a silver censer he carried the smoking incense. Many Taoists escorted him to the mountain behind the temple and pointed out the path.

“You must never retreat, if you are to save the people, Marshal,” said the abbot. “Just push on piously.”

Bidding the Taoists farewell and calling on the Highest Deity for aid, Marshal Hong started up the mountain, alone. He climbed the twisting overgrown path for two or three *li*, crossing a number of peaks. Soon his feet ached and his legs grew weary. He felt he couldn't move another step. Though he didn't say it aloud, he grumbled to himself:

“An important government official like me. When I'm in the capital I lie on double mattresses and dine on banquet dishes. Even then I don't have much

energy. What am I doing here in straw sandals, climbing this mountain path? Who knows where that Divine Teacher is anyhow? Why should I have to endure these torments?”

He was panting hard, his shoulders heaving, before he had gone another fifty paces. A strong wind blew through the hollow. When it had passed, a roar thundered from behind the pines and out leaped a huge tiger, with bulging eyes, a white forehead and striped fur.

“Aiya!” cried the marshal, toppling over backwards in terror.

The tiger, its eyes fixed upon him, circled left and right. Then it roared again and bounded off down the rear slope. Marshal Hong lay beneath a tree, his teeth chattering, his heart clanging like fifteen buckets in a single well. Paralyzed as if suffering a stroke, his legs limper than a defeated cock's, he could only moan.

Not until the tiger had been gone the time it takes to drink a cup of tea was the marshal able to crawl to his feet. He picked up the censer, re-lit the royal incense and continued up the mountain in search of the Divine Teacher.

The marshal climbed another forty or fifty paces. He sighed. “If the emperor hadn't set a time limit on my mission, I wouldn't have had to suffer such a fright.”

Before he finished speaking a strong wind blasted him with foul air. Marshal Hong heard a loud hissing. A big snake, thick as a bucket and dappled with snow-white spots, wriggled out of a grove of bamboo and vines on the mountainside.

“I'm dead man!” exclaimed the marshal. He fell on his back beside a spiral-shaped rock, dropping his censer.

The great snake moved rapidly towards the rock, then twisted itself into coils, its eyes shooting golden sparks. It opened its large mouth, flickering its tongue, and breathed poisonous fumes in the marshal's face.

So horrified was Marshal Hong that his three souls drifted and his seven spirits departed. The serpent looked at him, then slithered down the mountain and was quickly lost to sight. Only then was the marshal able to haul himself erect.

“Lucky,” he muttered. “That snake nearly scared me to death!” There were goose pimples all over his body. He cursed the abbot: “What rudeness, playing tricks on me and frightening me so. If I don't find the Divine Teacher on the summit I'll settle with that abbot when I get down!”

Again he picked up the silver incense burner, straightened his clothes, settled the edict on his back, and adjusted his hat. About to go on, he heard the notes of a flute coming softly from behind the pines. Gradually, the melody drew nearer. A yellow ox plodded over the rise. A boy novice, seated on its back, was smiling as he played a metal flute.

“Where are you from?” called the marshal. “Do you know who I am?”

The boy merely continued playing. Marshal Hong shouted the question several times. The boy laughed and pointed at him with his flute.

“You've come looking for the Divine Teacher, haven't you?” he said.

The marshal was astounded. “You're just a cowherd. How do you know?”

Smiling, the boy replied: “When I was serving the Divine Teacher in his thatched hut this morning he said: 'The emperor has sent a Marshal Hong here with royal incense and an imperial edict for me to go to the Eastern Capital and conduct a great prayer service that will drive away the plague. I shall mount a crane and ride the clouds and go there today. He must have left by now. He's not in the hut. There's no point in your climbing any higher. The mountain is full of venomous snakes and savage beasts. They're liable to kill you.”

“Are you telling me the truth?” the marshal demanded.

The novice only laughed, but didn't reply. He resumed playing his flute and rode off around the bend.

“How could that child know so much?” the marshal wondered. “The Divine Teacher must have told him. That's it.” He hesitated. “I've had those terrible frights and nearly lost my life. Maybe I'd better go back.”

Carrying the censer he returned hastily down the same path he had come. The Taoists received him and invited him to be seated in the abbey.

“Did you meet the Divine Teacher?” the abbot asked.

“I'm a high official of the imperial court. How could you send me up a mountain path and make me suffer such torments? I was nearly killed. First, halfway up, a big tiger with bulging eyes and a white forehead jumped out and scared the wits out of me. Then, before I had passed another gap, a great snake with snow-white spots wriggled from a thicket of bamboo and vines, wrapped itself in coils and blocked my path. If I weren't lucky, I'd never get back to the capital alive. It's all the fault of you Taoists. Making sport of me!”

“Would we humble Taoists dare show disrespect to a high minister?” said the abbot. “The Divine Teacher was testing your piety. Although there are snakes and tigers on our mountain, they don't hurt people.”

“By then I could hardly walk. Just as I was about to continue up the slope, a novice, sitting on a yellow ox and playing a metal flute, came riding over the rise. I asked him: 'Where are you from? Do you know me?' He answered: 'I know all about you.' He said the Divine Teacher told him he would mount a crane and ride the clouds to the Eastern Capital this morning. That's why I've returned.”

“Too bad,” cried the abbot. “Marshal, you missed your chance. That boy was the Divine Teacher.”

“A rustic-looking fellow like that?”

“The Divine Teacher of this generation is very unusual. Although young in years, he has a remarkable command of the Way. He's not an ordinary mortal. He can appear in any guise he wishes. People call him the Master of the Way.”

“I saw him and didn't recognize him! What a shame.”

“Never mind, Marshal. Since the Divine Teacher said he was going, by the time you return to the capital, the great prayer service will be successfully finished.”

On hearing this, the marshal felt better. The abbot ordered that a banquet be prepared for him. At the abbot's suggestion, the imperial edict was placed in a casket for royal documents, to be retained permanently in the temple; the royal incense was burned in the Hall of Three Purities. A big feast of meatless dishes was spread in the abbey. The diners ate and drank until dark. Then all retired.

After breakfast the next morning, the abbot, priests and abbey superintendents invited the marshal out for a sight-seeing stroll. He accepted with pleasure. Led by two novices they left the abbey, followed by a large entourage. They walked around the temple grounds, enjoying the beautiful scenery.

In the Hall of Three Purities the marshal was shown objects precious beyond words. He visited also the Nine Heavens Hall, the Propitious Star Hall, and the North Pole Hall, beside a covered walk on the left side of the grounds. Along another such walk on the right he inspected the Great Monad Hall, the Three Officials Hall and the Hall for Dispelling Evil.

He was then escorted to the grounds in the rear of the right walk. There he observed a building with walls as red as peppers, and vermilion-colored lattice-work on its two front windows. A lock as thick as a man's arm clamped together its double doors. A dozen strips of paper, pasted across the crack where the doors met, were stamped with innumerable red seals. Beneath the front eaves was a red plaque inscribed with letters of gold, reading: “Suppression of Demons Hall.”

“What is this place?” asked the marshal.

“A hall where an earlier Divine Teacher imprisoned some demons,” replied the abbot.

“Why are there so? many seals on the doors?”

“A Divine Teacher known as the Royal Master of the Way locked the demons in there in Tang times. Each subsequent Divine Teacher added his own seal, prohibiting any successor from opening the doors. If those demons escaped, it would be awful. Nine generations of Divine Teachers have ruled since then, and they all vowed to keep the hall closed. The lock has been filled with melted bronze. Who knows what's in there? I've been in charge of this temple for thirty years, but I only know what I've been told.”

Marshal Hong was surprised. “I certainly would like to see a demon,” he thought. To the abbot he said: “Open the doors. I want to see what a demon looks like.”

“I cannot, Marshal,” the abbot replied. “The early generation Divine Teacher has forbidden it. No one today would dare.”

The marshal laughed. “Nonsense. The story is an invention to delude people. You've deliberately prepared this place so that you can say you've got demons imprisoned as proof of the power of your Taoist magic. I've read many books, but none of them says anything about how to lock up demons. Spirits inhabit only the Nether Regions. I don't believe you've got any demons in there. Open up and let me have a look.”

“This hall mustn't be opened,” the abbot pleaded. “It would mean disaster.” Marshal Hong grew angry. He pointed his finger at the Taoists and roared: “If you don't do as I say I'll report to the court that you prevented me from delivering the imperial edict and refused to let me see the Divine Teacher. I'll tell how you rigged up this hall and invented the story that you've got demons inside in order to fool the public. I'll have your religious orders cancelled and have you all tattooed with the mark of the criminal and exiled to a wild and distant region!”

The abbot feared the influence of Marshal Hong. He had no choice but to order some blacksmith priests to remove the scales and break the lock. Then the doors were pushed open and everyone entered the hall. It was pitch dark. The marshal called for a dozen torches. When these were brought he saw that the hall was empty except for a stone tablet in the center. About six

feet high, it was based on a stone tortoise which was sunk halfway into the damp earthen floor. Hong moved the torches closer to the tablet. The front was inscribed with dragon and phoenix scripts and mystic signs and symbols which no one could understand. Then he looked at the back. There, written large, were four words: “Open when Hong comes.”

The marshal was delighted. “You tried to stop me,” he said to the abbot. “Yet my name was written here hundreds of years ago. 'Open when Hong comes.' It's perfectly plain. What's wrong if I have a look? I believe the demons are right here beneath this stone. Get a few more men with mattocks and shovels and dig it out.”

The abbot was horrified. “We can't do that, Marshal. Something terrible may happen. It's not safe!”

“What do you know, anyway?” the marshal shouted angrily. “It says clearly on the tablet it can be removed when I come. How dare you stop me? Get me those men.”

Four or five times the abbot pleaded: “No good will come of it.” But the marshal wouldn't listen. The workmen were summoned. After long and strenuous effort they pushed over the tablet and pried the stone tortoise out of the ground.

Then they started shovelling. At four feet they came upon a big stone slab some ten feet square. Marshal Hong directed them to dig it out. “You mustn't,” begged the abbot, but the marshal ignored him. When the men had removed the slab, a pit one hundred thousand feet deep was revealed. A great ripping sound was heard, and a black cloud shot out of the pit. It tore through half a corner of the roof and zoomed into the sky, where it split into more than a hundred golden rays which shimmered in every direction.

Everyone shouted in fright and threw down their tools. They dashed out of the hall, bowling people over left and right. Marshal Hong goggled and gaped helplessly. His face was the color of earth. He hurried out to the porch, where the abbot was lamenting.

“Who are those demons who escaped?” Hong asked. “Oh, Marshal, you didn't know,” groaned the abbot. “In this hall the Master of the Way left a written warning. It said: 'Thirty-six stars of Heavenly spirits and seventy-two stars of Earthly Fiends, a total of one hundred and eight demons, are imprisoned here, held down by a stone tablet inscribed with their names, written in a mystic script that resembles dragons and phoenixes. If they are released on earth they will cause no end of trouble.' Now you've let them out. What are we going to do?”

The marshal trembled and broke into a cold sweat. He hastily collected his luggage, marched down the mountain with his men and headed for the capital. The abbot and the Taoists saw them off, then returned to the temple, where they repaired the roof and re-erected the stone tablet. Of them we'll say no more.

During the return trip, afraid that the emperor would reproach him, the marshal instructed his men to say nothing about the escape of the demons. The march was uneventful. Travelling day and night, they soon reached Bianliang, the Eastern Capital. On entering the city they were told: “The Divine Teacher held a great prayer service in the Imperial Park for seven days and seven nights and distributed many charms. Now the sick are cured and the plague is completely gone. The Divine Teacher has taken leave of the emperor and returned to the Dragon and Tiger Mountain, astride a crane and riding the clouds.”

At early court the following morning, Marshal Hong reported to the emperor.

“The Divine Teacher mounted a crane and rode the clouds, so he arrived first,” said Hong. “We had to march every stage of the road. That's why we didn't get here till now.”

The emperor approved of his report. He rewarded the marshal and ordered him to resume his post. We'll say no more of this.

Emperor Ren Zong ruled for forty-two years and died without leaving a son. The throne passed to the son of Prince Yun Rang of Puan. A grandson of Tai Zong, he is known by his posthumous title of Ying Zong. After four

years of rule, he abdicated in favor of his son, Shen Zong, who reigned for eighteen years and then gave the throne to his son Zhe Zong. During this entire period there was peace throughout the land and no disturbances.

But not so fast. If it were true that nothing happened, what would we have to tell in this book? Reader, don't be alarmed, for in what follows thirty-six stars of Heavenly Spirits come to earth and seventy-two stars of Earthly Fiends appear among men. Valiants hide in strongholds, heroes gather in the marshes.

Why? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 2
Arms Instructor Wang Goes Secretly to Yanan Prefecture
Nine Dragons Shi Jin Wreaks Havoc in Shi Family Village

During the reign of Emperor Zhe Zong, who ruled a long time after Ren Zong, in Bianliang the Eastern Capital, in Kaifeng Prefecture previously called Xuanwu District, there lived a young scamp named Gao. A second son, he was quite useless. He cared only for jousting with spear and staff, and was an excellent football player. People in the capital were fond of making quips. They dubbed him Gao Qiu, or “Gao the Ball.” Later, when he prospered, he changed “Qiu” to another character with the same sound but with a less inelegant meaning.

In addition to his skill with weapons, Gao Qiu could play musical instruments and sing and dance. He also learned a bit about poetry and versifying. But when it came to virtue and proper behavior, he didn't know a thing. He spent his time gadding about the city and its environs. Thanks to him, the son of Master Wang, an iron-shop owner, dissipated a considerable sum of money in theaters, gambling dens and brothels.

For this reason the father made a written complaint against Gao to Kaifeng Prefecture. The prefect gave Gao twenty strokes, banished him from the city, and forbade the people of the Eastern Capital from either feeding him or giving him shelter. Gao Qiu's solution was to proffer his services to one

Liu Shiquan, known as Liu the Eldest, who ran a gambling house in Linhuai Prefecture, west of the Huaihe River. Liu surrounded himself with idlers and riffraff from all over.

Gao Qiu remained with Liu for three years. Then Emperor Zhe Zong prayed to Heaven south of the city, and this caused the winds and rains to become very propitious. The emperor was moved to benevolence, and he declared a general amnesty. Gao Qiu was able to return to the capital. Liu the Eldest wrote a letter of introduction to Dong Jiangshi, a relative of his who ran a medicinal herb shop near the Bridge of Golden Girders, gave Gao some travelling money, and told him Dong would take care of him.

Gao said goodbye, shouldered his pack and returned to the city, where he delivered the letter to Dong. The druggist took one look at Gao, then read the letter.

“How can I put this man up in my home?” he mused. “It would be different if he were straight and honest. The children could learn from him. But he's just a loafer, an untrustworthy fellow who's been exiled for breaking the law, and not the kind likely to reform. If I keep him here he's liable to teach the children bad ways. Yet if I don't I'll be offending Liu the Eldest.”

He had no choice but to receive Gao into his home with pretended delight. Dong feasted him every day for ten days, then he got an idea. He presented Gao with a suit of clothes and handed him a letter of introduction.

“The light of my household is too feeble,” he said. “It would only be holding you back to keep you here. I'm turning you over to Su Junior, the Court Scholar. With him you'll be able to make a start. How does that sound?”

Gao thanked him gratefully. Dong had a servant take the letter and escort Gao to the Court Scholar's residence. There, a gateman reported Gao's arrival. The Scholar came out and greeted him. He saw from the letter of introduction that Gao was a scamp.

“I can't take this man in,” thought the Scholar. “As a favor to Dong I'll send him to Wang Jinqing, the Young Prince Consort, to serve as a retainer. The

Young Prince likes that sort of fellow.”

He wrote Dong a reply and let Gao stay the night. The next day he wrote another letter and dispatched it with a steward who took Gao Qiu to the residence of the Young Prince.

Wang had married a younger sister of Emperor Zhe Zong before he took the throne and while Emperor Shen Zong still reigned. The Young Prince was partial to adventurous men, and he staffed his retinue with them. He liked Gao the moment he saw him with the Scholar's letter-bearing servant. He wrote an immediate reply, accepting him as a retainer. From then on Gao remained with the prince, coming and going like one of the family.

As the old saying has it: “Distant friends grow ever distant, friends at hand grow closer still.” To celebrate his birthday, the Young Prince ordered that a feast be laid, and invited Prince Duan, his wife's younger brother. Duan had been the eleventh child of Emperor Shen Zong and was a brother of the reigning emperor Zhe Zong. In charge of the imperial equipage, the Ninth Royal Prince, as he was called, was an intelligent, handsome young man, and a skilled dilettante in all forms of amusement. His accomplishments included the lute, chess, calligraphy, painting and football. He was also a good musician, singer and dancer.

That day, Wang the Young Prince spread a banquet of the finest delicacies of land and sea. He seated Duan the Ninth Royal Prince in the central chair or honor and sat down opposite. After several cups of wine and two courses, Prince Duan went out to relieve himself. He stopped by in the library on his return, where the Young Prince joined him. Duan was attracted by a pair of paper-weight lions carved of mutton-fat jade. They were extremely well made, in exquisite detail.

Prince Duan picked them up and couldn't set them down. “Beautiful,” he murmured.

“The same artisan also made a jade rack carved like a dragon for writing brushes,” said the Young Prince. “I don't have it handy, but I'll find it tomorrow and sent it to you together with these paper-weights.”

“That's awfully kind of you. I'm sure the dragon is carved even more finely than the lions.”

“I'll send it to the palace tomorrow. You'll be able to see for yourself.”

Prince Duan thanked him and they went back to the banquet table where they dined until dusk. Both were drunk when they parted. Prince Duan bade the prince consort farewell and returned to his palace.

The next day the Young Prince found the writing-brush rack carved like a dragon. He placed it in a small gold box together with the pair of jade paper-weight lions, wrapped the box in golden silk, wrote a covering letter, and told Gao to deliver the gifts. Gao proceeded directly to Prince Duan's palace. The gate-keeper reported his arrival to the steward, who came out.

“From which official residence are you?”

Gao Qiu bowed. “Prince Consort Wang has directed me to deliver these jade objects to the Royal Prince.”

“His Highness is in the middle court playing football with some young eunuchs. You may go in.”

“Could I trouble you to show me the way?”

The steward led Gao to the gate of the inner court. Four or five young eunuchs were kicking a ball with Prince Duan. He was wearing a soft Tang style silk hat and a purple robe embroidered with an imperial dragon. The robe was tucked up in front under the prince's official waist sash. Flying phoenixes embroidered in gold thread decorated his boots.

Gao dared not interrupt. He stood behind some servants and waited. Fortune favored him. The ball sailed past Prince Duan, who couldn't stop it, and rolled through the crowd to Gao Qiu. In a momentary seizure of boldness, he kicked it back to the prince with a “mandarin duck and drake twist.”

Duan was delighted. “Who are you?” he asked.

Gao fell on his knees, “A retainer of Prince Consort Wang. At my master's orders I bring Your Highness two jade gifts. I have a letter that goes with them.”

The royal prince smiled. “Brother-in-law is always considerate.”

Gao Qiu produced the letter. Prince Duan opened the box and looked at the jade pieces, the turned them over to his major-domo.

“So you know how to kick a ball,” he said to Gao. “What's your name?”

Gao crossed his arms before his chest respectfully and dropped again to his knees. “Your servant is called Gao Qiu. I've spent a little time with a ball on the field.”

“Good,” said the prince. “Come and join the game.”

“A man of my rank! I wouldn't dare play with your Highness.”

“Why not? This is the Clouds-High League, known as the Ail-Round Circle. It's open to anyone.”

Gao Qiu continued to refuse. But when the royal prince insisted, he kowtowed, begged forgiveness for his presumption, and trotted onto the field. He made a few passes with the ball and the prince shouted approval. Gao Qiu was inspired to show everything he had. His movements, his style, were a pleasure to behold. He stayed so close to the ball it seemed glued to his feet.

Prince Duan was enchanted. He wouldn't let Gao leave, and kept him overnight in the palace. The next day he ordered a feast and sent an invitation to the Young Prince.

When Gao failed to return the night before, the Young Prince began to wonder whether he could be trusted. Now, his gate-keeper announced: “A messenger from the Ninth Royal Prince is here with an invitation for Your Excellency to attend a banquet in the place.” The Young Prince went out

and received the messenger and read the invitation. The he got on his horse and rode to the palace. Dismounting, he proceeded directly to Prince Duan.

The Ninth Royal Prince thanked him for the two jade gifts. Together, they entered the dining-room.

“That Gao Qiu of yours plays a good game of football,” said Prince Duan. “I'd like to have him as a retainer. How about it?”

“If he's of any use to Your Highness, let him serve in the palace, by all means.”

Prince Duan raised his wine cup and thanked the Young Prince. The two chatted and dined until evening. Then the Young Prince returned to his residence. Of him we'll say no more.

Let us talk rather of Gao Qiu. After he went into the service of Prince Duan he lived and dined in the palace and accompanied the prince every day, never taking so much as a step from his side. Before two months had elapsed, Emperor Zhe Zong died without leaving an heir. All the high civil and military officials conferred and made Prince Duan the emperor. He was known as Emperor Hui Zong and bore the title of High Priest of Jade Purity and Taoist Sovereign of Provident Truth.

Hui Zong assumed the throne and all went well. One day he said to Gao Qiu: “I'd like to raise you in rank, but you'll have to perform some meritorious deed on the border first. I'll have the Council of Military Affairs put you down as available for imperial appointment.” Less than half a year later, he was able to make Gao Qiu a marshal commanding the Imperial Guards.

Gao Qiu selected an auspicious day and hour to assume office. All the officers of the Mighty Imperial Guards, both infantry and cavalry, who would be serving under him came to pay their respects. Each showed his identification document and registered. Gao Qiu examined the roster name by name. Only Wang Jin, an arms instructor in the Mighty Imperial Guards, had failed to appear. Half a month previous he had reported ill. Because he had not yet recovered, he hadn't returned to duty.

Marshal Gao was furious, “Nonsense,” he shouted. “Sheer insubordination! He sent in his identification document, didn't he? The oaf is just pretending to be sick. Bring him here at once!” Gao dispatched an officer to Wang Jin's house to arrest him.

Now this Wang Jin had no wife or children, only an aged mother in her sixties. The officer said to him: “Marshal Gao has taken office today. When he checked the roster, you weren't there. The chief of staff explained that you were sick at home, and that your excuse was properly registered. But Marshal Gao is very impatient. He wouldn't believe it. He insists that you're faking and wants you arrested. Please come along with me, Arms Instructor. Otherwise. I'll be in trouble.”

Wang Jin had no choice but to go to headquarters, sick as he was, and report to the marshal. He kowtowed four times, hailing Gao respectfully, then rose and stood to one side.

“Are you the churl whose father was Wang Sheng, an arms instructor in the district garrison?” Kao demanded.

“I am that humble person,” replied Wang Jin.

“Rogue,” cried Gao. “Your father was only a medicine pedlar who twirled a staff to attract to crowd. What do you know about military arts? The previous commander must have been blind to appoint you arms instructor. How dare you snub me and fail to report for roll call? Whose backing have you got that you can feign illness and loll around at home?”

“Your humble servant would never dare! I really haven't fully recovered.”

“Criminal! If you're sick, how could you come?”

“When the marshal summons me, I must obey.”

Gao was enraged. “Guards,” he roared, “seize this fellow and give him a good beating.”

Many of the junior officers were friends of Wang Jin. Together with the chief of staff they pleaded: “Today is the lucky day the marshal is assuming office. Please let the arms instructor off.”

“As a favor to these officers I'll excuse you today, criminal,” shouted Gao. “I'll settle with you tomorrow.”

Wang Jin thanked him. Only then did he raise his head and get a good look at Gao Qiu. As he left the gate of the headquarters' compound, Wang Jin sighed.

“My life is in danger. So that's our fine Marshal Gao. Loafer and football player, Gao the Second! When he was learning to joust with staves, my father gave him such a drubbing he couldn't get out of bed for three months. He's hated us ever since. Now that he's come up in the world and been appointed commander of the Imperial Guards he's sure to want revenge. Who would have thought that I'd be under him? As the old saying goes: 'Fear not officials—except those who officiate over you!' How can I stand up against him? What am I going to do?”

He returned home very depressed and told his mother about it. The two held their heads and wept.

“My son,” said the mother, '“Of all the thirty-six ways to get out of trouble, the best way is—leave.' Only I'm afraid you have no place to go.”

“You're right, mother,” said Wang Jin. “I've thought it over, and that's how I feel too. The border garrison of Yanan Prefecture is governed by Old General Zhong. Many of his officers who've visited the capital have admired my skill with arms. Why shouldn't I cast my lot in with them? Yanan's a place where men are needed. I'd be safe there.”

After talking it over, mother and son agreed.

“We must go secretly, my son,” said the mother. “But what about those two corporals at the door—the orderlies who were sent by headquarters? If they find out, we won't be able to get away.”

“Don't worry, mother,” said Wang Jin. “I know how to get rid of them.”

At dusk, he called Corporal Zhang in and said: “First have your dinner. Then I want you to go out and do something for me.”

“Where do you want your humble servant to go, Arms Instructor?”

“Because I was ill a few days ago, I vowed I would burn incense in the Temple of the Sacred Mountain outside Sour Date Gate if I got better. I want to do that first thing tomorrow morning. Tonight you tell the priest in charge of sacrifices to open the temple gate a little earlier tomorrow. I'll be the first worshipper. I want you to buy me three kinds of sacrificial meat. You can spend the night in the temple and wait for me there.”

Corporal Zhang promised to do as he was bid. He had his dinner, got things ready, and left for the temple.

That night mother and son packed their bedding and clothing, their silks and silver, and placed them in containers to be carried on a shoulder-pole. They also filled two saddle-bags with fodder for the horse.

At the fifth watch before dawn Wang Jin summoned Corporal Li and said: “Take these silver coins to the temple. You and Corporal Zhang buy and cook the three kinds of sacrificial meat, and wait for me. I'll join you just as soon as I've bought some sacrificial paper ingots and candles.”

Corporal Li took the silver and departed for the temple. Wang Jin got the horse ready, loaded on the saddle-bags, tied them firmly in place, led the animal outside the rear gate and helped his mother mount. All the heavier household belongings they left behind. Wang Jin locked the front and rear gates, raised the carrying-pole to his shoulder and walked behind the horse.

It was the fifth watch. Taking advantage of the darkness before dawn, they left the city by the West Gate and set out along the road towards the prefecture of Yanan.

To get back to the two orderlies. They bought the sacrificial meats, had them cooked, and waited in the temple until late morning. But Wang Jin

failed to appear. Corporal Li became worried. He returned to the house and found the gates locked. He couldn't get in, either front or back. Li inquired among the neighbors for several hours but no one had seen the arms instructor. It was getting late. Corporal Zhang in the temple grew suspicious and also hurried to Wang Jin's home. The two soldiers searched until dusk. But even after dark neither Wang Jin nor his mother returned.

The following day the two corporals inquired about Wang Jin in the homes of his relatives but could not discover any trace of him. Afraid of being implicated, they reported to the Imperial Guards headquarters: “Arms Instructor Wang Jin and his mother have fled. Their destination is unknown.”

Gao Qiu cried angrily: “So the criminal has escaped. We'll see how far he can get!” He notified every prefecture and district to arrest Wang Jin on sight as a deserter. Since the two corporals had reported the matter voluntarily, they were not charged. Of them we shall say no more.

Let us speak rather of Arms Instructor Wang Jin and his mother. They ate and drank only when hunger and thirst compelled them, stopping at night and travelling on again at dawn. One day towards evening, after more than a month on the road, Wang Jin, who was carrying a laden shoulder-pole behind the horse his mother was riding, said: “Heaven has been merciful. We've escaped the danger that was spread like a net over earth and sky. We're not far from Yanan Prefecture, Even if Marshal Gao sent men to arrest me, they couldn't catch us now.”

Mother and son, rejoicing, passed an inn without noticing it. There was no village in sight now. Although it was late, they didn't know where they could spend the night. Just then, they observed a lamp gleaming in a distant grove.

“There's the answer,” said Wang Jin. “We'll go there. We can apologize for disturbing them, ask for a place to spend the night, and go on again in the morning.”

Entering the grove, they found a large manor enclosed by an earthen wall. Around the outside of the wall were two or three hundred big willows. Wang Jin knocked on the gate a long time. Finally, a vassal came out. The arms instructor set down his load and greeted him.

“What do you want?” the man asked.

“To tell you the truth,” said Wang Jin, “my mother and I tried to cover too much ground and we passed an inn. There doesn't seem to be any inns or villages around here. We hope you can put us up for the night. We'll leave tomorrow morning. We'd be glad to pay whatever is customary for lodgings. Please let us impose on your kindness.”

“Wait a bit,” said the vassal. “I'll ask the squire. If he agrees, you can come in.”

“Sorry to trouble you, brother.”

Before long the man returned and said: “My master bids you both to enter.”

Wang Jin helped his mother dismount. Carrying his shoulder-pole and leading the horse, he followed the vassal to a threshing-ground. There he set down his burden and tied the horse to a willow tree. Mother and son went to a hall roofed with thatch. The squire was waiting for them.

He was a man over sixty. His hair and beard were white. He wore a hood and a straight-cut loose-fitting gown, tied at the waist by a black silk sash. His feet were shod in tanned leather boots.

Wang Jin kowtowed respectfully.

“That's not necessary,” the old man said hastily. “You're travellers who've been exposed to the elements. Please be seated.”

Mother and son completed their ceremonial greetings and sat down.

“Where are you from?” asked the squire. “Why have you come here so late in the day?”

“Your humble servant is called Zhang,” said Wang Jin. “We live in the capital. Because we've used up our money and cannot carry on our business, we're going to Yanan Prefecture to join some relatives. On the road today we were too eager to press on, and passed an inn without noticing it. If you'll permit us to spend the night here we'll leave in the morning and pay whatever is customary for accommodations.”

“Certainly. Who carries his lodgings with him when he travels? I don't suppose you and your mother have eaten?” The squire told his vassal to bring food.

Soon a table was set up in the hall and the vassal came in with a tray bearing four vegetable dishes and one of beef. He set these on the table and heated some wine which he served first.

“Our fare is crude here in the country,” said the squire. “I hope you'll forgive us.”

Wang Jin rose and thanked him. “We're putting you to too much trouble. We don't know how to repay you.”

“No need to talk like that,” said the squire. “Let us drink.”

In response to his urging Wang Jin and his mother downed six or seven cups of wine. Then the food was served and they ate. After the bowls and dishes had been cleared away the squire rose and led them to a guest-room.

“Could I trouble you to see to it that the horse my mother rode is stabled and fed?” said Wang Jin. “Of course we'll pay.”

“That's easy,” the squire replied. “We have horses and mules here. I'll tell a vassal to put your horse in our stable and feed it with the other animals.”

Wang Jin thanked him, raised his shoulder-pole and carried his belongings into the guest-room. A vassal lit a lamp and brought in hot water so that the travellers could wash their feet. The squire returned to his own quarters. Wang Jin and his mother thanked the servant, closed the door and retired.

They slept all night. By dawn the following day they still hadn't emerged from their room, and the squire approached their door. He heard Wang Jin's mother groaning.

“It's already dawn, guest,” called the old man. “You'd better rise.”

Wang Jin hurried outside and greeted his host. “I've been up for some time,” he said. “We put you to a lot of trouble last night. It really wasn't right.”

“Who was groaning just now?”

“To tell you the truth, my mother is exhausted from riding. Last night her heart began paining her again.”

“In that case why not stay on here a few more days? Don't worry. I know a good prescription for pains of the heart. I'll send a servant to the county town and get some medicine for your mother. Tell her to set her mind at ease and just rest.”

Wang Jin thanked him.

But enough of petty details. Wang Jin and his mother remained at the manor, and the old lady took the medicine. After six or seven days she felt that her illness was cured. Wang Jin packed their belongings and prepared to continue their journey. On his way to the stable to look at his horse he observed in a clearing a young man stripped to the waist with blue dragons tattooed all over his body. His face was as round as a silver platter. About nineteen, he was practising with a staff.

Wang Jin watched for a while, then said without thinking: “Not a bad style, but it has weaknesses. It wouldn't stop anyone who was really good.”

The young man overheard him. “Who are you to laugh at my skill?” he demanded angrily. “I've had eight of the best teachers. Don't think I can't knock you down! Do you dare have a go with me?”

As he was speaking, the squire came along. “None of your insolence,” shouted the old man.

“What right has this fellow to laugh at my technique?” the boy asked.

“Do you know how to wield a staff, guest?” queried the squire.

“A little,” replied Wang Jin. “May I presume to ask, sir, what this young man's relationship is to you?”

“He is my son.”

“Since he is the young master, if he wishes to learn, your humble servant can give him a few pointers. Is that agreeable?”

“Excellent,” said the squire. And he directed the young man: “Kowtow to your teacher.”

But the boy would have none of it. “Don't be taken in by this varlet's talk, pa,” he said hotly. “I'll kowtow to him as my teacher only if he can beat me at staves!”

“If the young master won't take it seriously,” said Wang Jin, “we can have a bout, just for fun.”

Standing in the center of the clearing the boy whirled his staff over his head like a windmill. “Come on, then,” he exclaimed. “Come at me, if you have the nerve!”

Wang Jin smiled, but he made no move.

“Since you're willing to teach the boy, guest,” said the squire, “why not joust with him?”

“I'm afraid I'll hurt the young master,” Wang Jin laughed. “It wouldn't look nice.”

“That's all right. If you break his hand or foot he'll have brought it on himself.”

“Forgive me, then.” Wang Jin selected a staff from a weapons rack, walked into the clearing and struck a stance.

The young man looked him over, then raised his staff and charged. Wang Jin quickly withdrew, trailing his weapon. The boy flourished his staff and gave chase. Suddenly Wang Jin turned and lifted his weapon as if to hack down. His opponent raised his own staff to parry. But Wang Jin swiftly retracted his weapon, then thrust it against his adversary's chest. The boy fell flat on his back, his staff flying off to the side.

Wang Jin cast his weapon away and hurried to help the young man. “I'm terribly sorry,” he said.

The boy crawled to his feet. He brought over a stool, seated Wang Jin upon it and kowtowed respectfully. “I've studied with many instructors,” he said, “but they've taught me practically nothing. Teacher, all I can do is beg for your guidance.”

“My mother and I have imposed on your household for several days with no way to show our gratitude. It's only right that I should do my best.”

The squire was very pleased. He told his son to dress, and all went to a rear hall and sat down. The old man ordered a vassal to slaughter a sheep and prepare wine and food and fruit. Then he invited Wang Jin and his mother to join him in a feast.

When the four were seated at the table the old man poured out the wine. Rising, he toasted Wang Jin. “With your remarkable skill, you must be an arms instructor,” he said. “My son 'has eyes but didn't recognize Mount Taishan.'”

Wang Jin laughed. '“To a true man, one tells the truth.' Your servant's name isn't Zhang, it's Wang Jin. I'm an arms instructor in the Eastern Capital's Mighty Imperial Guards. I play with spears and staves every day. Gao Qiu, who has just been appointed commander of the Imperial Guards, was once beaten by my father. He's been longing for revenge and wants to take it out on me. Being under his command, I can't stand up against him. So I've run off with my mother. We're heading for Yanan Prefecture to join the border garrison commanded by Old General Zhong. We never expected that we would come here and be so well treated by you, sir, and your son. You've cured my mother's illness and entertained us for days. We've really imposed

too much. If your son wants to learn, your servant will gladly teach him with all his heart. What he's learned so far are a lot of flashy manoeuvres. They look good, but they're of no use in combat. I'll teach him from the beginning."

"My son," said the squire, "admit your defeat. Kowtow to your teacher once again." The young man did so.

"Let me tell you, honored teacher," the old man continued. "My clan has always lived here in Huayin County. There before us is Mount Shaohua. The village is called Shi Family Village. All of the three or four hundred families in it are named Shi. My son, since childhood, has had no interest in farming. He cares only for play with weapons. His mother tried in vain to talk him out of it. She finally died of worry. I had to let him have his way. I don't know how much money I've spent on weapons teachers. I also paid a skilled tattooist to decorate his arms and chest with dragons—nine in all. For that reason he's known throughout the county as Nine Dragons Shi Jin. It's good that you've come, Instructor, and can complete his training. I'll reward you handsomely."

Wang Jin was delighted. "Rest assured, old squire," he said. "If that is your wish, your servant will teach him well."

They drank and feasted. From that day on, Wang Jin and his mother remained in the manor. Wang Jin instructed the young man every day, teaching him the use of the eighteen weapons: lance, mallet, long bow, crossbow, jingal, jointed bludgeon, truncheon, sword, chain, hooks, hatchet, axe, trident, halberd, shield, staff, spear and rake. Squire Shi went to the county town of Huayin to serve as a ward chief. Of that we'll say no more.

The days slipped by. Soon half a year had passed. Shi Jin became adapt at the eighteen weapons. Wang Jin put his heart into teaching, explaining the fine points of each. When the young man had mastered the weapons. Wang Jin thought to himself: "Although it's very pleasant here, I'm not getting anywhere." He wanted to continue on to Yanan, but Shi Jin wouldn't hear of him leaving.

“Stay, teacher,” the young man pleaded. “I'll support you and your mother the rest of your lives. Won't that do?”

“Thank you for your good intentions, young brother,” said Wang Jin. “It's fine here. But I'm afraid Marshal Gao will send men after me, and you'll become implicated. That wouldn't be right. We'd both be in trouble. I'm determined to go on to Yanan and join the garrison under Old General Zhong. It's a border post and they need men. I can make a fresh start there.”

Since they couldn't persuade Wang Jin to stay, Shi Jin and his father gave him a farewell banquet. They presented him with two bolts of satin and a hundred ounces of silver, brought in on a platter.

The next day Wang Jin tied his luggage to his shoulder-pole and got the horse ready. He and his mother took their leave of the old squire, then Wang Jin helped his mother into the saddle and they set out for Yanan. Shi Jin had a vassal carry the shoulder-pole. He himself, hating to part, escorted his guests for ten *li.* Finally Shi Jin bowed to his teacher and said good-bye with tears in his eyes. He returned with the vassal to the manor. Wang Jin shouldered the carrying-pole and followed behind the horse. Mother and son proceeded westward along the road.

We'll talk not of Wang Jin, who went to join the garrison, but rather of Shi Jin. Every day, he steeled himself vigorously. Young, unmarried, he often got up in the middle of the night to drill with weapons. During the day he practised archery and rode horseback behind the manor.

Before half a year had gone by, his father fell ill and could not leave his bed. Shi Jin brought doctors from near and far, but none of them could save him. To the sorrow of all, the old man died. Shi Jin prepared a coffin and outer casket, in which his father was laid, richly dressed, and he hired Buddhist monks to conduct seven services, one every seven days, to pray for the departed squire. He also paid Taoist priests to chant prayers ensuring the passage of his father's soul straight to heaven. There were more than ten of these services. He then selected an auspicious day for the funeral. All of the three or four hundred families in the village attended, dressed in mourning. Squire Shi was buried in the ancestral cemetery on a hillside west of the village.

Now there was no one to look after Shi Jin's household affairs. The young man cared nothing for farming. His only interest was in finding people with whom he could match skill at arms.

Three or four months passed. It was the middle of the sixth lunar month, and very hot. Shi Jin sat on a folding-chair beneath a willow on the edge of the threshing-ground outside the manor, seeking a breath of cool air. He had nothing to do. A breeze wafted in from the pine grove opposite. “How refreshing,” thought Shi Jin.

Suddenly he saw a man poke his head out of the grove and peer around. “Who's that over there,” Shi Jin shouted, “looking at our manor?” He leaped to his feet and ran to the trees. There, behind a pine, he discovered Li Ji, the rabbit hunter.

“Why are you watching the manor?” Shi Jin demanded. “Are you spying on me?”

Li Ji came forward and greeted him respectfully. “Your humble servant was looking for Shorty Qiu. I wanted him to have a bowl of wine with me. When I saw the Young Master sitting there, enjoying the breeze, I didn't dare intrude.”

“Let me ask you. You used to come often and sell us game. I never underpaid you. Why have you stopped? Do you think I have no money?”

“Would I dare think that? There just hasn't been any game lately. That's why I haven't come.”

“Piffle! A mountain as big and wide as Shaohua? Do you expect me to believe there are no deer, no rabbits?”

“So you haven't heard, Young Master? Bandits have built a fort on the mountain. They've six or seven hundred men and over a hundred good horses. Their leader is called Miraculous Strategist Zhu Wu. The second in command is called Gorge-Leaping Tiger Chen Da. The third is called White-Spotted Snake Yang Chun. These three raid and pillage at will. The Huayin County authorities can do nothing about them. They've offered a

reward of three thousand strings of cash for their capture. But who dares to try? Your servant is afraid to go hunting on the mountain. That's why I can't offer you any game."

"I've heard there were bandits up there," said Shi Jin. "I didn't know the scoundrels were so active. They're bound to make trouble for me. But I still would like some game if you can catch any."

Li Ji bowed and departed.

Shi Jin returned to the manor. "Those rogues are going at it in a big way," he thought. "They'll probably attack our village. In that case...."

He ordered his vassals to slaughter two fat water buffaloes and bring out some good home-made wine. First he burned paper replicas of gold and silver ingots as an offering to Heaven and prayed for good luck. Then he invited the three or four hundred local peasants to the hall in the manor. After all were seated according to age, he had the vassals pour them wine.

"I hear that three robber chieftains have formed a gang of six or seven hundred bandits on Mount Shaohua who raid and pillage," he said. "Since they're operating in a big way, sooner or later they're going to attack our village. I've invited you here for a conference. When those rascals come, every family must be ready. If our manor sounds the alarm, all of you come running with your weapons. We'll do the same if any of you are attacked. We'll help each other and defend our village. If the chieftains come, I'll deal with them personally."

"You make the decisions, Young Master," said the peasants. "We depend on you. When the alarm sounds none of us will stay away." At evening they drank a final cup in thanks and returned to their homes to prepare their weapons.

Shi Jin strengthened the gates and walls of the manor and put everything in order. He issued suits of armor, and had swords and horses kept in readiness. Of this we'll say no more.

We'll speak instead of the three bandit chieftains on Mount Shaohua. They sat down, one day, and conferred. Zhu Wu the Miraculous Strategist, their leader, was from Dingyuan. His weapons were two swords. Although not an especially good fighter, he was skilled in battle tactics and was a clever strategist. The second in command, Chen Da was from the city of Yecheng. He wielded a steel-tipped spear. Yang Chun, number three, was from Xieliang County in Puzhou. He used a halberd.

“I hear that Huayin County is offering a reward of three thousand strings of cash and is mustering men to arrest us,” said Zhu Wu. “We'll give them a bloody battle when they come. The trouble is we're short of money and grain. We'd better go out and rob some. We'll need a grain reserve to see us through if troops besiege us.”

“That's right,” said Chen Da the Gorge-Leaping Tiger. “Let's demand grain from Huayin County, and see what they do about it.”

“Don't go to Huayin,” Yang Chun the White-Spotted Snake advised. “Pucheng would be better. It's a sure thing.”

“There aren't many people in Pucheng,” said Chen Da, “and they don't have much money or grain. I'm for raiding Huayin. The people are prosperous there. They've money and grain aplenty.”

“You don't understand, brother,” said Yang Chun. “To get to Huayin, we have to pass Shi Family Village. That Nine Dragons Shi Jin is very tough. It's not wise to stir him up. He'd never let us by.”

“Weak talk, brother,” said Chen Da. “If we can't get past a mere village, how are we going to stand up against government troops?”

“You shouldn't underestimate Shi Jin, brother,” Yang Chun replied. “He's really fierce.”

“I too have heard that he's very brave,” said Zhu Wu. “They say his skill with weapons is first rate. Let's not go, brothers.”

“Shut your craven mouths,” Chen Da cried. “Praising other people's courage pulls down your own. After all he's only human. Does he have three heads and six arms? I don't believe it!” And he shouted to his cohorts: “Get my horse. I'm going to attack Shi Family Village, then I'm going to take Huayin.”

Zhu Wu and Yang Chun tried to dissuade him, but he wouldn't listen. He donned armor and mounted his horse, picked a hundred and fifty men and, drums beating and gongs crashing, started down the mountain towards Shi Family Village.

Shi Jin, who was in front of the manor checking his men's arms and equipment, was informed of this by one of his vassals. He promptly had the alarm beat out on a bamboo segment. From all sides men of the four hundred village families came running to the manor, carrying their weapons. They found Shi Jin wearing a ridged turban, a vermilion coat of mail, iron breastplate and backpiece, an embroidered black robe, green boots and a leather belt. He had a bow and a quiver of arrows, and he grasped a three-pointed double-edged sword with four holes and eight rings.

A vassal led forward his fiery red horse. Shi Jin mounted. He raised his sword. Preceded by forty strong vassals and followed by ninety villagers and peasants, Shi Jin set forth. Shouting and cheering, the rest of the villagers brought up the rear and followed them to the road north of the village.

Chen Da led his men swiftly down the mountain and told them to spread out. Shi Jin saw that he was wearing a red concave hat, a golden suit of mail, a red robe and thick-soled boots. Around his waist was a long plaited girdle. He rode a high white horse and carried level a steel-tipped lance eighteen feet long. The men on both sides set up a fierce cry.

From their mounts, the two leaders looked at each other. Chen Da bowed in his saddle.

“You murder and burn, rob and plunder, your terrible crimes are all punishable by death,” Shi Jin shouted. “Haven't you heard of me? Where do you get the gall to come and tweak the tiger's whiskers?”

“We're short of grain in our mountain fortress,” Chen Da replied. “We hope to borrow some in Huayin. The road brings us by your honorable manor, but of course we wouldn't dare touch a blade of grass here. Let us pass. We'll thank you properly on our return.”

“Nonsense. I'm a ward chief. I've been meaning to go out after you bandits, but now you've come to me. If I let you go and the magistrate hears about it, I'll be implicated.”

“'Within the four seas, all men are brothers.' We'll trouble you to let us by.”

“Enough of idle chatter. Even if I were willing, there's another who won't agree. You'll have to ask him.”

“And who is that, good valiant?”

“This sword in my hand!”

Chen Da grew angry. “Don't push me too far. You'll force me to retaliate!”

Shi Jin, also angry,-flourished his sword, spurred his horse and charged. Chen Da struck his own mount and galloped forward with levelled lance. The two men clashed and fought. After several rounds, Shi Jin feinted, pretending to leave his chest exposed, and Chen Da lunged. The young squire dodged the streaking lance. Their bodies met. Shi Jin threw an agile arm around Chen Da's waist, seized him by his plaited girdle and, with a quick twist, lifted him from his decorated saddle and flung him to the ground. The bandit leader's horse dashed away like the wind. Shi Jin shouted for his men to tie Chen Da up. The rest of the bandits were driven off.

Shi Jin returned to the manor and had Chen Da bound to a pillar in the courtyard. He decided that when he captured the other two bandit chieftains as well he would turn all three over to the authorities and claim the reward. He dispensed wine to his men and told them they could go. They drank, praising his courage.

Back in the mountain fortress, Zhu Wu and Yang Chun were wondering why there was still no news. They sent out a scout. Soon the other bandits returned, leading a riderless horse. As they climbed, they shouted to the chieftains: “Bitterness and woe! Chen Da wouldn't listen to you two older brothers, and now he's as good as dead.”

Zhu Wu asked what had gone wrong. The bandits told him about the battle, adding: “That Shi Jin is a mighty warrior.”

“Chen Da wouldn't listen to me,” said Zhu Wu, “and sure enough he's met with disaster.”

“Let's go down in full force and fight it out,” suggested Yang Chun.

“Impossible,” said Zhu Wu. “If Chen Da couldn't beat him, how can you? I have an idea. It's risky, but it may save Chen Da. If it doesn't you and I are finished, too.”

“What is it?”

Zhu Wu whispered the plan in his ear.

“Excellent,” said Yang Chun. “Let's go, then. We've no time to lose.”

Shi Jin, in the manor, was still in a temper when a vassal rushed in and reported: “Zhu Wu and Yang Chun are on their way from the mountain fortress.”

“Those scoundrels. I'll turn them both in. Bring my horse, quickly.”

The alarm was sounded and the villagers gathered. He mounted and was riding through the manor gate when he saw Zhu Wu and Yang Chun approaching on foot. They knelt and gazed at him with tears streaming down their cheeks. Shi Jin reined his animal and shouted: “What are you kneeling there for?”

Weeping, Zhu Wu replied: “We three small men were harried so by the officials that we were forced to go into the hills and become outlaws. We swore that 'although not born on the same day we would on the same day

die.' Perhaps ours cannot be compared to the brotherhood between Guan Gong, Zhang Fei and Liu Bei of antiquity, but our hearts are equally sincere. Today our younger brother Chen Da went against our advice. He offended Your Excellency and has been locked up in your honorable manor. Since we have no way to save him, we've come to die with him. Please turn the three of us over to the officials and collect the reward. We won't even frown. We gladly ask you to send us to our deaths."

Shi Jin thought to himself: "What loyalty! If I turn them in and claim the reward every stout-hearted fellow in the land will scorn me. 'A tiger doesn't pounce on supine prey,' as the old saying goes." To the kneeling bandit chiefs he said: "Come with me."

The two, without fear, followed him to the rear hall. Again they knelt and asked him to tie them up. Shi Jin repeatedly urged them to rise, but they wouldn't hear of it. "The astute spare the astute, and the brave know the brave."

Sure enough, the young squire said: "Since you two are so loyal, I'd be no true man if I handed you over to the authorities. Suppose I gave Chen Da back to you, how would that be?"

"You'd only become implicated," said Zhu Wu. "That would never do. We'd much rather you turned us in and claimed the reward."

"Impossible," retorted Shi Jin. "Will you share my food and drink?"

"Death doesn't scare us," said Zhu Wu. "Why should your meat and wine?"

The young squire was very pleased. He untied Chen Da and spread a feast for the three bandit chiefs in the rear hall. Zhu Wu, Yang Chun and Chen Da thanked him for his kindness. After several drinks, they all looked more cheerful. When the wine was finished, the three chieftains again thanked Shi Jin and went back to their mountain. Shi Jin saw them off as far as the manor gate.

After returning to the fortress, Zhu Wu sat down with the other two. "If it weren't for our plan, would any of us be alive now?" he said. "Not only did

we save Chen Da, but Shi Jin, with rare gallantry, released us all: In a few days we must send him some gifts to show our gratitude."

Let's skip the petty details. Ten or so days later, the three bandit chiefs, on a moonless night, dispatched two of their men with thirty gold bars. The men knocked at the manor gate and a vassal reported their arrival. Shi Jin quickly donned his clothes and went out to meet them.

"Do you have a message for me?"

"Our three chieftains offer their respects. We are instructed to deliver this paltry gift in thanks to Your Excellency for sparing their lives. Please don't reject it, but keep it with a smile." They handed Shi Jin the gold.

At first he was going to refuse, but then he thought: "Since they were good enough to send it, I ought to accept." He directed his vassal to give the messengers wine. They drank until after midnight. Then Shi Jin tipped them with silver and told them to return.

Less than half a month later the bandit chiefs again conferred, and once more sent messengers at night to the manor, this time with a string of large precious pearls they had obtained in a robbery. Shi Jin accepted it. Of this we'll say no more.

After another half month Shi Jin thought to himself: "Those three show so much respect, I really ought to send them some gifts in return." The next day he instructed a vassal to buy three bolts of red brocade in the county town and have a tailor make three gowns for the bandit chiefs. He also had three fat sheep slaughtered and cooked. These and the clothes he had two men deliver in a large box.

Shi Jin's steward was a man named Wang the Fourth. This fellow's tongue was so nimble he could converse with officials. The other servants called him "Bodang's Equal." Wang was one of the two messengers. When they arrived with the box at the foot of the mountain, bandit sentries questioned them, then led them to the fortress. The bandit chiefs were delighted with the brocaded silk gowns and the delicious mutton and wine. They tipped the

messengers ten ounces of silver and poured them more than a dozen bowls of wine. Shi Jin's men then returned to the manor.

“The mountain chiefs are very grateful,” they told the young squire.

Thereafter Shi Jin had considerable dealings with the bandit leaders. Wang the Fourth went to the mountain lair a number of times with gifts. On several occasions the chiefs sent gold and silver to Shi Jin.

The days sped by. Soon it was the eighth lunar month, the time of the Mid-Autumn Festival. Shi Jin decided to ask the three bandit chieftains to enjoy the full moon and drink wine at the manor on the night of the fifteenth. He sent Wang the Fourth to the stronghold with a written invitation. The three leaders accepted with pleasure. They wrote out a reply, tipped Wang five ounces of silver and gave him more than ten bowls of wine.

On the way home Wang ran into two bandits who frequently came to the manor with gifts. They embraced him and dragged him off to a grog shop in a mountain hamlet by the side of the road, where he downed another ten bowls. Finally they parted and Wang resumed his homeward journey. A strong wind buffeted him and brought all the wine to his head. Wang staggered along for about ten *li* until he came to a grove. He plunged in and threw himself down on a grassy sward.

It so happened that Li Ji the hunter was out after rabbits on the mountainside. He knew Wang and, seeing him lying there, went to help him up, but the steward was much too heavy. The hunter's sharp eye noticed the bulge of silver in Wang's belt sash.

“The knave is drunk,” he thought. “Where did he get so much money? Why don't I help myself?” Li Ji took off the sash and shook it. The pieces of silver and the brigands' reply fell to the ground. He picked up the letter and opened it. He was barely literate, and could recognize only the names Zhu Wu, Chen Da and Yang Chun. The flowery language of the rest he was unable to read.

“It's not easy for a poor hunter like me to come up in the world,” he said to himself. “Yet the fortune-teller said this year I would get rich. This must be

my chance! In Huayin Town I saw a proclamation offering a reward of three thousand strings of cash for the capture of those three bandits. No wonder the other day, when I was looking for Shorty Qiu, that rogue of a Shi Jin was afraid I was spying on him. He's been in league with those brigands right along!”

Li Ji took the pieces of silver and the letter and headed for Huayin to report to the authorities.

When Wang the Fourth awakened it was already the second watch. He was startled to find himself bathed in pale moonlight. He leaped to his feet and looked around. On all sides were pine trees. He felt his waist.

His sash and letter were gone. Wang searched everywhere. He found only the empty sash, lying on the grass.

Wang the Fourth groaned. “It doesn't matter about the silver,” he thought. “But it's terrible to lose that letter. Who could have taken it?” He frowned. “If I say I've lost it, the master will be furious. He'll throw me out. I'd better say there wasn't any written reply. He'll never know the difference.”

The steward flew back to the manor. It was well into the fifth watch when he arrived.

“What took you so long?” Shi Jin demanded.

“Out of courtesy to you, master, the three chiefs wouldn't let me go. They plied me with drink till after midnight. That's why I'm late.”

“Did they send any reply?”

“They were going to write one, but I said: 'Since you're definitely coming, why bother with a written reply? Your servant has been drinking. What if I lost it on the way home? That wouldn't be any joke.'”

“No wonder everybody calls you 'Bodang's Equal',” Shi Jin commended him smilingly. “You're really clever.”

“Your servant didn't dare delay. I hurried back without stopping once.”

“Well then, send someone to the county town for tidbits to go with the wine we'll serve our guests.”

Soon it was Mid-Autumn Festival Day. The weather was bright and clear. Shi Jin instructed his servants to slaughter a big sheep and kill over a hundred chickens and geese and prepare a feast.

Zhu Wu, Chen Da and Yang Chun directed their minions to guard the stronghold. Towards evening they came down the mountain with an escort of five men. They each carried a halberd and a sword. All were walking, having left their horses in the fortress. They headed straight for the manor.

Shi Jin received them and they exchanged courtesies. The young squire invited them to the rear garden, where a banquet had been spread. He asked them to take the seats of honor. He sat down opposite, and told his vassals to bolt the front and rear gates of the manor. As host and guests drank, attendants kept refilling their cups and carving the sheep. By the time several cups were drained, a full moon was rising in the east.

They drank and enjoyed the Mid-Autumn Festival, and chatted about old things and new. Suddenly, they heard a clamor outside the manor and saw the glow of torches. Shi Jin, startled, rose quickly.

“Please remain seated, friends. I'll go and see what's the matter,” he said. Shouting to his vassals: “Don't open the gate,” he climbed a ladder to the top of the wall and looked over.

The sheriff of Huayin County, two constables and three or four hundred soldiers had surrounded the manor. Shi Jin and the bandit leaders groaned. In the light of the torches the young squire could see a veritable forest of pronged spears, halberds, five-tined forks and barbed spears. The constables were shouting: “Don't let the robbers escape!”

If this detachment hadn't come to arrest Shi Jin and the three chiefs, would Shi have killed several men and joined with a dozen or more gallants? As a result, warriors gathered deep amid the reeds, and in the shade of lotus leaves rode craft of war.

How did Shi Jin and the three bandit chiefs escape? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 3
Master Shi Leaves Huayin County at Night
Major Lu Pummels the Lord of the West

“What shall I do?” Shi Jin exclaimed.

Zhu Wu and the other two bandit chieftains knelt before him and said: “Your hands are clean, brother. Don't get involved because of us. It's better to tie us up and claim the reward than have your own good name besmirched.”

“Impossible,” retorted Shi Jin. “If I did such a thing it would look as if I inveigled you here so that I could get the money. Everyone would laugh at me. We'll live or die together. Stand up and don't worry. There's no need to sacrifice yourselves on my account. Let me see what this is all about.”

He mounted the ladder and called: “What do you mean by coming here in the middle of the night and raiding my manor?”

“Don't pretend, Young Master,” the constables replied. “Li Ji, who made the accusation, is right here with us.”

“Li Ji,” Shi Jin shouted, “how could you slander an honest man?”

“I didn't know, at first,” the hunter responded. “I picked up a letter Wang the Fourth was carrying in the woods and took it to the county seat to have it read. This is the result.”

Shi Jin summoned Wang. “You said there was no reply. Where did that letter come from?”

“I was drunk. I forgot about it.”

“Wretch,” shouted Shi Jin. “You've got us in a pretty fix.”

Afraid of Shi Jin's fighting prowess, the constables didn't dare force their way into the manor. “Better give them an answer,” the bandit leaders advised. Shi Jin understood.

“Don't start anything, you constables,” he called from the top of the ladder. “Move back from my walls. I'm going to tie the bandits up and turn them over to the officials for the reward.”

The constables had no desire to clash with Shi Jin. “We don't want any trouble,” they said. “Bring them out and we'll go with you to the magistrate, together.”

Shi Jin came down from the ladder and went to the front of the hall. He had Wang the Fourth taken to the rear garden and killed him with one blow of the sword. Next he ordered his vassals to pack all his portable valuables and light thirty or forty torches. He and the bandit chiefs put on their armor and took halberds and swords from the weapons rack. Then they set fire to the thatched buildings in the back of the manor house. Meanwhile, the vassals also packed their own belongings.

When the soldiers outside saw the flames, they rushed around to the rear. Shi Jin set the central hall to the torch, threw open the front gate and charged out with a mighty yell. Followed by Zhu Wu, Yang Chun and Chen Da and their guards, Shi Jin and his men plunged into the fray. They young squire was a formidable warrior. Who could withstand him?

As wild flames enkindled the sky, Shi Jin and his men cut a path through the soldiers. He soon found himself face to face with the two constables and Li Ji. Shi Jin flew into a rage. “When enemies meet, their eyes blaze.” The constables could see that things were going badly. They turned and ran. Li Ji also tried to escape, but Shi Jin was quickly upon him. With one sweep of his blade, he cleaved Li Ji in twain. Chen Da and Yang Chun dispatched the constables with one thrust of their halberds each. The county sheriff, terrified, galloped off as fast as his horse would take him. Of course the soldiers dared not advance. They ran for their lives in all directions.

Killing as they went, Shi Jin and his cohorts proceeded directly to the bandits' stronghold on Mount Shaohua. Only then did they sit down and

catch their breaths. Zhu Wu and other leaders ordered their men to slaughter steers and horses and prepare a celebration feast. Of this we'll say no more. Shi Jin remained for several days. He thought to himself: “To save three people, I burned down my manor. Although I managed to keep a few small valuables, my larger property is gone completely.” He felt uneasy. How could he stay in a place like this? He said to the brigand chief. “Instructor Wang, my arms teacher, is attached to a border garrison west of the Pass. I've been intending to seek him out, but because my father died I was unable to leave. Now that the manor is ruined, there's nothing to keep me here.”

“Don't go, brother,” the bandit leaders urged. “Stay on a while, and we'll talk it over again. If you don't want to join us, when things have quieted down a bit we'll rebuild your manor and you can become a respectable citizen again.”

“Your intentions are good but I don't wish to remain. If I can find my teacher and get some sort of job I can distinguish myself in, I'll be happy the rest of my life.”

“Why not stay on and be our chief? Wouldn't that make you happy?” queried Zhu Wu. “Of course our mountain stronghold is too small for a man like you.”

“My reputation is spotless. How can I sully the body my parents have given me? There's no use your trying to persuade me to become a bandit.”

A few days later, Shi Jin decided to depart. The exhortations of the three chieftains were in vain. He left his servants and most of his money in the fortress and took only some small pieces of silver which he wrapped in a bundle.

A broad-brimmed felt hat topped by a red tassel covered the soft black bandanna which bound his head. Around his neck was a kerchief of bright yellow. He wore a white silk military gown tied at the waist by a plum-colored sash five fingers wide. His legs were wrapped with alternate strips of blue and white. On his feet were looped hemp sandals, good for mountain climbing. A sword hung from his waist.

Shi Jin tied his bundle to his back, took up his halberd and bid farewell to the three chieftains. They and the other bandits saw him to the foot of the mountain. Weeping, they parted from Shi Jin and returned to their stronghold.

Shi Jin followed the road leading to Yanan Prefecture. He ate and drank when hungry and thirsty, he stopped only at night and set out again the next day at dawn. He travelled in this manner, alone, for more than half a month until he arrived in Weizhou.

“This is also a border garrison,” he said to himself. “Maybe my teacher, Instructor Wang, is here.”

He entered the town. It was a bustling place, with several streets and market-places. On a street corner he saw a small tea-house. He went in and sat down.

A waiter approached him. “What kind of tea would you like, sir?”

“I'll have a cup of steeped.”

The waiter brought his order and placed it on the table before him.

“Where is the town's garrison command?” asked Shi Jin.

“It's that place just up ahead.”

“Do you know whether they have an arms instructor from the Eastern Capital, a man called Wang Jin?”

“The garrison has many arms instructors. There are three or four named Wang. But I don't know whether any of them is Wang Jin.”

While the waiter was talking, a big fellow who looked like an army officer strode in. His head was bound in a bandanna with figured swastikas, buckled in the back with twisted gold rings from Taiyuan. A raven-black plaited sash bound his parrot-green warrior's gown at the waist. On his feet

were yellow boots embossed with four welts of brown leather in hawk talon design. He had large ears, a straight nose and a broad mouth. A full beard framed his round face. He was six feet tall and had a girth of ten spans.

When the new-comer had taken a seat, the waiter said to Shi Jin: “That's the major. You can ask him about Wang Jin. He knows all the arms instructors.”

Shi Jin rose quickly and bowed. “May I invite you to some tea, sir? Please join me.”

The officer saw that Shi Jin was a big stalwart fellow who seemed a man of valor. He walked over and returned his greeting. Then the two sat down together.

“May I be so bold as to ask your name, sir?” Shi Jin queried.

“I'm called Lu Da. I'm a major in this garrison. And who are you, brother?”

“My name is Shi Jin. I'm from Huayin County in Huazhou Prefecture. My teacher, Wang Jin, used to be an arms instructor in the Mighty Imperial Guards in the Eastern Capital. Could you tell me, sir, whether he's here in this garrison?”

“Say, aren't you Young Master Shi from Shi Family Village, the fellow they call Nine Dragons?”

Shi Jin bowed. “I am that humble person.”

Lu Da returned his courtesy, '“Meeting a man of fame is better than just hearing his name.' Is your teacher the Wang Jin who got in wrong with Marshal Gao in the Eastern Capital?”

“The same.”

“I've heard of him, but he's not here. They say he's with Old General Zhong in the Yanan garrison. Weizhou is a small post. Young General Zhong is our commander. Brother Wang is not with us. So you're Young Master Shi. I've heard a lot of good things about you. Come out and have a few drinks with me.”

He took Shi Jin by the hand. As they were leaving the teahouse, Lu Da called over his shoulder: “Charge the tea to me.”

“It doesn't matter, Major,” replied the waiter. “Just go along.”

Lu Da and Shi Jin strolled down the street arm in arm. Before they had gone fifty paces they saw many people gathered around an open plot of ground.

“Let's take a look,” Shi Jin suggested.

They pushed through the crowd. There in the center was a man holding a dozen or so staves. Various packets of salves and ointments, with prices marked, were arrayed on a platter on the ground. The man was a medicine pedlar who attracted customers by putting on a show with weapons.

Shi Jin recognized him. It was his first arms instructor, Li Zhong, nicknamed the Tiger-Fighting General.

“Teacher,” called Shi Jin. “I haven't seen you in ages.”

“What are you doing here, young brother?” Li Zhong cried.

“Since you're Young Master Shi's teacher,” said Lu Da, “come and have a few cups with us.”

“Gladly, just as soon as I've sold some of these medicines and earned some money.”

“Who's got time to wait? Come on, if you're coming.”

“Mince is a hand-to-mouth existence, Major. Go ahead. I'll catch up with you later.... Young brother, you go on first with the major.”

Lu Da was very irritated. He roughly shoved the spectators aside. “Haul your assholes out of here or I'll beat you to a pulp,” he bellowed.

The crowd, recognizing him, hastily scattered. Li Zhong was angry, but he dared not protest. Lu Da was obviously much too fierce. “How impatient

you are," Li said with a placating smile. He gathered up his arms and medicines, gave them to a friend for safe-keeping, and set off with Shi Jin and the major.

They turned this way and that through the streets until they came to a famous tavern run by a family named Pan at the foot of a bridge. From a pole sticking out over the tavern door a pennant fluttered in the breeze indicating that liquor was sold on the premises. They went upstairs and selected a clean room. Lu Da took the host's seat, Lin Zhong sat opposite, while Shi Jin seated himself at the side.

The waiter, who knew Lu Da, greeted them respectfully. "How much wine do you want, Major?" he asked.

"We'll start with four measures."

The waiter laid out dishes to go with the wine. "What would you like to eat, sir?"

"Questions, questions," Lu Da exploded. "Bring whatever you've got, add up the bill and I'll pay! Must you gab so?"

That waiter went downstairs. Soon he returned and heated the wine. He covered the table with platters of meat and other food.

Each of the three men downed several cups. They talked of this and that, comparing methods in feats at arms. Just as their conversation was at its liveliest, they heard the sound of sobbing in the next room. The irascible Lu Da immediately became enraged. He snatched plates and dishes and smashed them on the floor. The waiter, alarmed, rushed up the stairs. He found Lu Da fuming.

"If there's anything you want, sir, just give the order and I'll bring it," he said, with a bow.

"Who wants anything? I think you know who I am. Yet you have the brass to allow people to bawl in the next room and disturb us while we dine. I haven't underpaid you, have I?"

“Don't be angry, sir. I would never permit anyone to disturb you. The people weeping are a man and his daughter who sing in the taverns. They didn't know you and your friends were drinking here. They can't help lamenting their bitter fate.”

“There's something peculiar going on. Bring them here to me.”

In a few minutes the waiter returned with a girl of about eighteen, followed by a man in his late fifties. Both carried wooden clappers. Though not very pretty, the girl was rather appealing. Wiping her eyes, she made three curtsies. The old man also greeted the diners.

“Where are you from?” asked Lu Da. “Why do you weep?”

“I will tell you our story, sir,” the girl replied. “We are from the Eastern Capital. My parents and I came to visit a relative, but when we arrived we learned he had left Weizhou for the Southern Capital. My mother fell ill in the inn and died. My father and I were having a hard time. Master Zheng, who is called the Lord of the West, saw me and wanted me for a concubine. He sent people to wheedle and threaten, and finally signed a contract promising my father three thousand strings of cash for me.”

“The contract was real but the promise was false. In less than three months his wife, a hard woman, drove me out of the house. What's more, Master Zheng ordered the innkeeper to demand that we 'return' his three thousand strings of cash. We never received a penny of his money. How could we repay him? My father is weak. He couldn't argue with a rich and powerful man like Zheng. We didn't know what to do. My father taught me many ballads when I was a child and we began making rounds of the taverns, singing. We give Zheng most of what little we earned each day, saving a little for our travelling expenses so that we can go home.

“But the last few days the taverns haven't had much business, so we couldn't pay. We're afraid Zheng will come asking for it and abuse us. Ours is a hard lot, and we've no place to seek redress. That's why we've been weeping. We hadn't meant to disturb you, sir. Please forgive us.”

“What's your family name?” asked Lu Da. “Which inn are you staying at? Where does Master Zheng, that Lord of the West, live?”

The old man replied: “Our name is Jin. I am the second among my brothers. My daughter is called Jade Lotus. Master Zheng is the butcher who sells meat at the foot of Zhuangyuan Bridge. His nickname is Lord of the West. My daughter and I live in the Lu Family Inn just up ahead inside the town's East Gate.”

“Bah,” said Lu Da contemptuously. “So Master Zheng is only Zheng the pig-sticker, the dirty rogue who runs a butcher shop under the patronage of Young General Zhong, our garrison commander. And he cheats and bullies too, does he?”

He turned to Li Zhong and Shi Jin. “You two wait here while I beat the varlet to death. I'll be right back.”

They grabbed him. “Calm yourself, brother,” they pleaded. “Let's talk this over again later.” They finally managed to restrain him.

“Come here, old man,” Lu Da said to the father. “I'll give you some money. Tomorrow you can go back to the Eastern Capital. How about it?”

“If you can help us return home you'll be giving us a new lease on life,” said father and daughter. “But we're afraid the innkeeper won't let us go. Master Zheng has ordered him to collect our payments.”

“Don't worry about that,” said Lu Da. “I'll take care of the innkeeper.” He pulled out five ounces of silver and placed them on the table. To Shi Jin he said: “This is all I've brought today. If you have any silver, lend it to me. I'll give it back tomorrow.”

“It doesn't matter, brother. No need to repay.” Shi Jin extracted a silver bar weighing ten ounces from his bundle and put it down beside Lu Da's money.

The major looked at Li Zhong. “You lend me some too.”

Li Zhong produced two ounces of silver.

Lu Da was annoyed at the smallness of the offering. “Big-hearted, aren't you?” he snorted. He handed the fifteen ounces of silver to the old man. “This will cover your travelling expenses for you and your daughter. Go to the inn and pack your things,” he directed. “Tomorrow at dawn I'll come and see you off. Just let that innkeeper try and stop you!”

Old Jin and his daughter thanked him and departed. Lu Da returned the two ounces to Li Zhong.

After the three men finished two more measures of wine they went down the stairs. “I'll pay you tomorrow, host,” called Lu Da.

“Just go along,” the owner of the tavern said. “You can drink here on credit any time, sir. Our only fear is you won't come.”

The three left the Pan Family Tavern. On the street they separated. Shi Jin and Li Zhong went to their respective inns.

Lu Da returned to his quarters near the garrison and angrily went to bed without any supper. His landlord didn't dare ask what was wrong.

Old Jin returned to his inn with the fifteen ounces of silver. He settled his daughter down, went to a place far outside the town and hired a cart. Then he returned to the inn, packed their belongings and paid their rent, fuel and rice bills. After that they could only wait for the morrow.

The night passed without incident. Father and daughter rose at dawn, lit a fire and cooked breakfast. When they finished eating, they collected their utensils. The sky was just turning light. Lu Da strode into the inn.

“Boy,” he called, “which room is Old Jin's?”

“Uncle Jin,” the attendant shouted, “Major Lu Da is here to see you.” The old man opened his door. “Ah, Major, please come in and sit a while.”

“Sit, nothing,” retorted Lu Da. “If you're going, go. What are you waiting for?”

Old Jin summoned his daughter and raised his carrying-pole to his shoulder. He thanked Lu Da and started for the inn gate. The attendant stopped him.

“Where are you going, Uncle Jin?”

“Does he owe you any rent?” Lu Da demanded.

“He paid up last night. But Master Zheng has ordered me to collect the money he laid out for Jin's daughter.”

“I'll return the butcher's money in person. Let the old man go.”

The attendant refused. Lu Da slapped him across the face with such force that blood gushed from his mouth. The punch that followed knocked out two of his front teeth. Crawling to his feet, the attendant scuttled to the interior of the inn and hid himself.

Of course the innkeeper dared not intervene.

Jin and his daughter quickly departed from the inn, then left the town to get the cart the old man had hired the day before.

Lu Da, afraid the attendant might still try to stop them, sat himself down on a stool in the inn and remained there for four hours. Only when he was confident that the old man was far away did he leave the inn. He went directly to the Zhuangyuan Bridge.

There Zheng had a two-room butcher shop with two chopping blocks. Four or five sides of pork were hanging on display. Zheng sat behind a counter by the door, keeping an eye on his ten or so assistants as they cut and sold meat.

Lu Da came to the door. “Butcher Zheng,” he shouted.

Zheng recognized him. He came out rapidly from behind the counter and greeted him with respect. “Major, a pleasure.” He directed an assistant to bring a bench. “Please be seated, sir.”

Lu Da sat down. “The garrison commander has ordered me to buy ten catties of lean meat, chopped fine, to be used for filling. There mustn't be a speck of fat in it.”

“Right,” said Zheng. He turned to his assistants. “Pick out a good cut and chop up ten catties.”

“I don't want those dirty oafs touching it,” said Lu Da. “You do it yourself.”

“Certainly,” said Zheng. “Glad to.” He selected a cut of ten catties of lean meat and started mincing.

The attendant from the inn, his head bound in a white handkerchief, arrived to tell Zheng about Old Jin. But when he saw Lu Da seated at the door, he was afraid to come any closer. He stood under the eaves of a house, observing the proceedings cautiously from a distance.

After chopping for an hour, Zheng wrapped the minced meat in a lotus leaf. “Shall I have it delivered, sir?” he asked.

“Delivered, nothing. What's your hurry? Now cut up ten catties of fat meat. There mustn't be a speck of lean in it. This is also for filling.”

“The lean can be put in dumplings, but what good is the fat?”

Lu Da glared. “When the commander gives an order, who dares question him?”

“As long as you can use it I'll chop it for you.” Zheng selected a cut of ten catties of fat meat and began mincing. By the time he wrapped it in a lotus leaf the morning had gone and it was the hour for lunch.

The inn attendant dared not approach. Even other customers were afraid to draw near.

“Shall I have this delivered to the garrison command for you, sir?” asked Zheng.

“Now I want ten catties of gristle, chopped fine, also to be used for filling, and I don't want to see any meat in it.”

Zheng laughed awkwardly. “Are you making fun of me?”

Lu Da leaped up, one package of chopped meat in each hand, and scowled at the butcher. “That's exactly what I'm doing—making fun of you.” He flung the contents of the packages full in Zheng's face.

The shower of meat stung the butcher into a rage. From the soles of his feet, fury surged into his forehead. An irrepressible flame blazed in his heart. He grabbed a paring knife from the butcher's block and jumped down from the shop steps. Lu Da was waiting for him in the middle of the street.

None of the dozen or so clerks from the neighboring shops dared to mediate. Passers-by stood frozen in their tracks on both sides of the street. The attendant from the inn was struck dumb.

The knife in his right hand, Zheng reached for Lu Da with his left. Lu Da seized the outstretched hand, closed in and sent the butcher sprawling with a swift kick in the groin. Another step forward and he put his foot on Zheng's chest. Raising a fist like a vinegar keg, Lu Da thundered: “I was roving inspector of five western military districts under Old General Zhong. People might very well call me Lord of the West. But you're just a meat slicing butcher, a low cur. Where do you come off giving yourself such a title? And who gave you the right to force and cheat Jin's daughter Jade Lotus?”

He landed a punch on Zheng's nose that flattened it to one side and brought the blood flowing like the sauces in a condiments shop— salty, sour and spicy. Zheng struggled vainly to rise. The knife fell from his hand. “A good blow,” he cried.

“Mother-raping thief,” said the major. “How dare you talk back?” He punched the butcher on the eyebrow, splitting the lid so that the eyeball protruded. Red, black and purple gore flowed like swatches of cloth in a draper's shop.

The spectators were all afraid of Lu Da. None of them ventured to intervene.

Vanquished, Zheng begged to be spared.

“You scurvy knave,” the major exclaimed scornfully. “If you had shown any guts I might have let you off. But since you're so lily-livered, I won't.” He struck the butcher a heavy blow on the temple. Zheng's head rang like the clanging of gongs, bells and cymbals in a big memorial service. The butcher lay stretched on the ground. Breath was coming out of his mouth, but none was going in. He didn't move.

Lu Da pretended to he incensed. “Playing dead, eh? I'll hit you a few more!” He had observed that Zheng's face was changing color. “I only wanted to give the varlet a beating,” he said to himself. “Who would have thought that three blows would kill him? They're sure to hold me for trial, and I've nobody to bring me food in prison. I'd better get out of here.”

He rose and strode away, pausing briefly to look back, shake his finger at Zheng's corpse and shout: “Go on playing dead. I'll settle with you later.”

Neither the butcher's assistants nor the clerks in the neighboring shops had the courage to stop him.

Lu Da returned to his quarters and hastily packed. He took only some travelling clothes and a bit of silver. His old garments and heavier things he left behind. Carrying a staff as a weapon, he sped out of the South Gate like a wisp of smoke.

Although Zheng's family and the inn attendant worked on the butcher a long time, they couldn't bring him back to life. He was quite dead. His wife and neighbors went to the prefecture and filed a charge of murder. Court was called into session, and the prefect took his place and read the document of accusation.

“That Lu Da is a major of the garrison,” thought the prefect. Instead of issuing an order for his arrest forthwith, he mounted his sedan-chair and went to the headquarters of the garrison commander. He stepped down from

his chair and had the soldier at the gate announce him. He was ushered into the main hall where he was received by the commander. The two men exchanged courtesies.

“What brings you here?” asked the commander.

“I've come to inform Your Excellency that Major Lu Da has, without cause, beaten to death on the street a butcher named Zheng. I wouldn't presume to arrest him without reporting to Your Excellency first.”

The commander was startled. “That Lu Da is a skilled military man,” he thought, “but he's rough and crude. Today he's committed a murder. How can I cover up for him? I must let him be taken and questioned.” To the prefect he said: “Lu Da originally was an officer of my father, the Old General. I had no proper aide, and he was sent here as a major. Since he's committed a capital offence you may arrest and interrogate him according to law. If you get a confession and the crime is proved, you must inform my father before passing sentence. Otherwise it might be very embarrassing if, at some future date, my father should ask for him back.”

“I'll get to the bottom of this and send a formal report to the Old General before any sentence is passed,” the prefect promised.

He said farewell to the commander, left the garrison headquarters, got into his sedan-chair and returned to the prefecture. There he resumed court and issued an order to the police inspector on duty for Lu Da's arrest. The officer, with twenty men, set out immediately for Lu Da's lodging.

“He left only a little while ago with a few bundles and a staff,” the landlord told them. “I assumed the major was going on official business, so I didn't dare ask.”

The police inspector directed that Lu Da's room be opened and searched. All that could be found was some old clothes and bedding. Taking the landlord with them, the officer and his men searched the town from south to north. There was no trace of Lu Da. The police inspector returned to the prefect with the landlord and two neighbors in custody, and reported.

“Major Lu Da has fled to escape punishment, no one knows where. I've arrested these neighbors and his landlord.”

The prefect ordered that they be held and that Zheng's family and close neighbors be summoned. Along with forensic experts, local officials and the ward chief, he made a careful examination of the victim. The butcher's family encoffined the body and stored it temporarily in a monastery.

Appropriate documents were filed, and the prefect ordered his police to apprehend Lu Da within a specified time, on pain of being beaten. The complainant was allowed to go home, after filing a surety bond. The close neighbors who had witnessed the crime were beaten for failing to rescue Zheng. Lu Da's landlord and neighbors were not charged. An urgent proclamation, offering a thousand strings of cash for Lu Da's capture and giving his age, birthplace and description, was posted everywhere. All concerned were then released and told to await further notice. Zheng's family went into mourning. Of this we'll say no more.

To return to Lu Da: after leaving Weizhou, he hurried pell-mell east and west, passing through several prefectural towns. With him it was a case of:

Any food when you're hungry,

When you're cold rags save life;

Any road when you're frightened,

When you're poor any wife.

<

PHe dashed about in a panic, with no idea where to go.

After many days of wandering, he arrived in Yanmen, a county seat in the prefecture of Daizhou. It was a bustling town with many people and thriving markets. Carts and horses filled the streets, which were lined by shops conducting trade and commerce of every type. Although only a county seat, it was more prosperous than a prefectural capital.

On a street corner he saw a crowd gathered in front of a proclamation. Someone was reading it aloud. Illiterate himself, he pushed forward to listen. This is what he heard:

By order of the military commander of Taiyuan, this county hereby publishes the following notice from Weizhou: Wanted—the killer of Butcher Zheng. Name—Lu Da, former major in the Weizhou garrison command. Any man who conceals him or gives him food and shelter shall be deemed equally guilty. Whoever arrests and brings him forward, or offers information leading to his arrest, shall receive a reward of one thousand strings of cash....

As Lu Da stood listening, someone threw his arms around him from behind and cried: “What are you doing here, brother Zhang?” He pulled Lu Da away from the street corner.

If this man hadn't seen him and dragged him away, Lu Da would never have shaved off his hair and beard, changed the name which identified him as a murderer, and wrecked the idols in the temple.

And as a result: His Buddhist staff smashed open a dangerous road; his monk's knife slaughtered unjust men.

Who, after all, was the person who grabbed Lu Da? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 4
Sagacious Lu Puts Mount Wutai in an Uproar
Squire Zhao Repairs Wenshu Monastery

Lu Da turned to see who was hustling him away. It was none other than Old Jin from the Weizhou tavern, the man he had rescued. The old fellow didn't stop pulling till they reached an isolated spot. Then he said:

“You're too rash, benefactor. That notice offers a thousand strings of cash for your capture. How could you stand there looking at it? If I hadn't spotted you, you might have been nabbed by the police. Your age, description and place of origin are all there.”

“To tell you the truth, when I went to the foot of the Zhuangyuan Bridge that day to see Zheng the butcher about your affair, I killed the churl with three blows of the fist, and had to flee. I've been knocking about for forty or fifty days now, and just happened to wander into this town. I thought you were returning to the Eastern Capital. What are you doing here?”

“After you saved me, benefactor, I found a cart. Originally I intended to go back to the Eastern Capital, but I was afraid that rogue would catch up and you wouldn't be around to rescue us. So I changed my mind and headed north. On the road I met an old neighbor from the capital who was coming here on business. He took me and my daughter along. He was good enough to find her a match. She's now the mistress of a wealthy man, Squire Zhao. The squire has provided her with a house. Thanks to you, benefactor, we now have plenty to eat and wear. My daughter has often spoken to the squire of your kindness. He is also fond of jousting. He's said many times he'd like to meet you, but that was never possible before. You must come and stay with us a few days. We can talk about what you should do next.”

Lu Da and Old Jin walked less man half a *li* when they came to the door of a house. The old man pushed aside the bamboo curtain and called:

“Daughter, our benefactor is here.”

The girl emerged, neatly made up and attractively dressed. She begged Lu Da to be seated in the center of the room. Then, as if offering votive candles, she kowtowed before him six times. “If you hadn't rescued us, benefactor,” she said, “we'd never possess what we have today.” She invited him upstairs to the parlor.

“Don't bother,” said Lu Da. “I must be going.”

“Now that you're here, benefactor, of course we can't let you leave,” said the old man. He took Lu Da's staff and bundles and ushered him up the stairs. To his daughter he said: “Keep our benefactor company. I'll arrange about dinner.”

“Don't go to a lot of trouble,” said Lu Da. “Anything will do.”

“Even if I gave my life I could never repay your benevolence,” said Old Jin. “A little simple food—it's not worth mentioning.”

The daughter sat with Lu Da while the old man went downstairs and directed the boy they had recently hired to tell the servant girl to get the kitchen fire started. Then Old Jin and the boy went out and bought fresh fish, a tender chicken, a goose, pickled fish and fresh fruit. He took these home, opened a jug of wine, prepared a few dishes, and carried them upstairs. There wine cups were placed on a table, and three sets of chopsticks. When the food and fruit were served, the servant girl came in with a silver wine kettle and heated the wine.

Father and daughter each filled Lu Da's cup in turn. Then Old Jin dropped to his knees and kowtowed.

“Please, dear elder, don't do that,” said Lu Da. “You embarrass me terribly.”

“When we first came here, not long ago,” said the old man, “I wrote your name on a strip of red paper and pasted it on a wooden tablet. We burn a stick of incense before it every morning and evening, and my daughter and I kowtow before it. Now that you're here, why shouldn't we kowtow to you in person?”

“I'm touched by your devotion,” said Lu Da.

The three drank till almost nightfall. Suddenly they heard a commotion outside. Lu Da opened the window and looked. Some twenty to thirty men, all armed with staves, were gathered in front of the house. “Bring him down,” they were shouting. A gentleman on a horse cried: “Don't let the rascal get away!”

Lu Da realized that he was in danger. He snatched up a stool and started down the stairs. Old Jin, waving his hands, rushed down ahead of him, exclaiming: “Nobody move!” He ran over to the man on horseback and said a few words. The mounted gentleman laughed. He ordered his band to disperse.

When the men had gone, the gentleman got off his horse and entered the house. Old Jin asked Lu Da to come down. The gentleman bowed as Lu Da descended the stairs.

“'Meeting a man of fame is better than just hearing his name.' Please accept my homage, righteous Major.”

“Who is this gentleman?” Lu Da asked Old Jin. “We don't know each other. Why should he be so respectful?”

“This is Squire Zhao, my daughter's lord. Someone told him that a young man I had brought to his house was upstairs, drinking. So he got some of his vassals and came to fight. When I explained, he sent them away.”

“So that was it,” said Lu Da. “You could hardly blame him.”

Squire Zhao invited Lu Da to the upper chamber. Old Jin reset the table, and once more prepared food and drink. Zhao ushered the major to the seat of honor. Lu Da refused.

“How could I presume?”

“A small mark of my respect. I have heard much of the major's heroism. What great good fortune that I could meet you today.”

“Though I'm just a crude fellow who's committed a capital offence, the squire doesn't scorn my lowliness and is willing to make my acquaintance. If there's any way I can be of service, you have only to speak.”

Squire Zhao was very pleased. He asked all about the fight with Zheng the butcher. They talked of this and that, discussed jousting with arms, and drank far into the night. Then every one retired.

The following morning Zhao said: “I'm afraid this place isn't very safe. Why not come and stay at my manor a while?”

“Where is it?” asked Lu Da.

“A little over ten *li* from here, near a village called Seven Treasures.”

“All right.”

The squire sent a vassal to the manor to get a horse for Lu Da. The man returned with the beast before noon. Squire Zhao told the vassals to bring Lu Da's luggage and asked the major to mount. Lu Da said goodbye to Old Jin and his daughter, and set out with the squire.

The two rode side by side, chatting idly, until they came to Seven Treasures. Not long after, they reached the manor and dismounted. Squire Zhao led Lu Da by the hand into a hall, where they seated themselves as host and guest. The squire ordered that a sheep be slaughtered and wine be served.

That night, Lu Da slept in a guest-room. The next day he was again wined and dined.

“You're much too good to me, Squire,” said the major. “How can I repay you?”

“'Within the four seas, all men are brothers,'“ quoted the squire. “Why mention repayment?”

But enough of minor matters. Lu Da stayed at the manor for six or seven days. He and the squire were chatting in the study one day when Old Jin hastily entered. He looked to see that no one else was around, then said to

Lu Da: “You mustn't think me overly cautious, benefactor. But ever since the night the squire and his vassals raised such a row in the street because you were drinking upstairs, people have been suspicious. Word has spread that you were there. Yesterday three or four policemen were questioning the neighbors. I'm worried that they'll come here and arrest you. It would be awful if anything should happen to you, benefactor.”

“In that case,” said Lu Da, “I'd better be on my way.”

“Things might turn out badly if I kept you here, Major,” the squire admitted. “Yet if I don't I'll lose a lot of face. I have another idea. It's foolproof and will give you complete protection. But maybe you won't be willing.”

“I'm a man with a death penalty waiting for him. I'll do anything to find refuge.”

“That's fine. Where the Wenshu Buddha used to meditate on Mount Wutai, some thirty-odd *li* from here, a monastery was erected. They have nearly seven hundred monks. The abbot is my friend. My ancestors were patrons of the monastery and contributed to its upkeep. I have promised to sponsor a novice, and have bought a blank certificate, but have not yet found a suitable man, If you agree to join the Buddhist order, Major, I'll pay all expenses. Would you be willing to shave off your hair and become a monk?”

Lu Da thought to himself. “Who could I go to for protection if I were to leave here today? I'd better accept his offer.” Aloud he said: “I'll become a monk if you sponsor me, Squire. I rely entirely on your kindness.”

And so it was decided. That night, clothing, expense money and silks were prepared. Everyone rose early the next morning. Lu Da and the squire set out for Mount Wutai, accompanied by vassals carrying the gifts and luggage. They reached the foot of the mountain before mid-morning. Squire Zhao and Lu Da went up in sedan-chairs, sending a vassal on ahead to announce them.

At the monastery gate, they found the deacon and supervisor waiting to welcome them. They got out of their sedan-chairs and rested in a small pavilion while the abbot was notified. He soon emerged with his assistant and the elder. Squire Zhao and Lu Da hurried forward and bowed. The abbot placed the palms of his hands together before his chest in Buddhist greeting.

“It's good of you to travel this long distance, patron,” he said.

“There is a small matter I'd like to trouble you about,” said the squire.

“Please come into the abbey and have some tea.”

Lu Da followed Squire Zhao to the hall. The abbot invited the squire to take the seat for guests. Lu Da sat down on a couch facing the abbot. The squire leaned over and whispered to him: “You're here to become a monk. How can you sit opposite the abbot?”

“I didn't know,” said Lu Da. He rose and stood beside Squire Zhao.

The elder, the prior, the abbot's assistant, the supervisor, the deacon, the reception monk, and the scribe arranged themselves in two rows, according to rank, on the east and west sides of the hall.

Zhao's vassals left the sedan-chairs in a suitable place and carried into the hall several boxes which they laid before the abbot.

“Why have you brought gifts again?” asked the abbot. “You've already made so many donations.”

“Only a few small things,” replied Squire Zhao. “They don't merit any thanks.”

Some lay brothers and novices took them away.

Squire Zhao stood up. “I have something to ask of you, Great Abbot. It has long been my desire to sponsor a new member for this monastery. Although I have had the certificate ready for some time, until today I have not been able to do so. This cousin here is named Lu. He formerly was a military

officer, but because of many difficulties he wants to have done with mundane affairs and become a monk. I earnestly hope Your Eminence will exercise mercy and compassion and, as a favor to me, accept this man into your order. I will pay all expenses. I shall be very happy if you consent."

"Gladly," said the abbot. "This will add lustre to our monastery. Please have some tea."

A novice served tea. After all had drunk, he removed the cups. The abbot consulted with the elder and the prior on the ceremony for receiving Lu Da into the order, then instructed the supervisor and deacon to prepare a vegetarian meal.

"That man hasn't the makings of a monk," the elder said to the other monks, privately. "See what fierce eyes he has!"

"Get them out of here a while," they requested the Receiver of Guests. "We want to talk to the abbot."

The reception monk invited Squire Zhao and Lu Da to rest in the visitors' hostel. They departed, and the elder and the others approached the abbot.

"That new applicant is a savage-looking brute," they said. "If we accept him, he's sure to cause trouble."

"He's cousin of Squire Zhao, our patron. How can we refuse? Hold your doubts while I look into the matter." The abbot lit a stick of incense and sat cross-legged on a couch. Muttering an incantation, he went into a trance. By the time the incense was consumed, he returned.

"You can go ahead with the ordination," said the abbot. "This man represents a star in Heaven. His heart is honest. Even though his appearance is savage and his life has been troubled, he will eventually become purified and attain sainthood. None of you is his equal. Mark my words. Let no one dissent."

"The abbot is only covering up his faults," the elder said to the others. "But we'll have to do as he says. We can only advise. If he won't listen, that's up

to him.”

Squire Zhao and the others were invited to dine in the abbey. When they had finished, the supervisor presented a list of what Lu Da would need as a monk—special shoes, clothing, hat, cape and kneeling cushion. The squire gave some silver and asked that the monastery buy the necessary materials and make them up.

A day or two later all was ready. The abbot selected a propitious day and hour, and ordered that the bells be rung and the drums beaten. Everyone assembled in the preaching hall. Draped in their capes, nearly six hundred monks placed the palms of their hands together in an obeisance to the abbot sitting on his dais, then separated into two groups. Squire Zhao, bearing gifts of silver ingots and fine cloth and carrying a stick of incense, approached the dais and bowed.

The purpose of the ceremony was announced. A novice led Lu Da to the abbot's dais. The prior told him to remove his hat, divided his hair into nine parts and knotted them. The barber shaved them all off. He reached with his razor for Lu Da's beard.

“Leave me that, at least,” the major exclaimed.

The monks couldn't repress their laughter.

“Hear me,” the abbot said sternly from his dais. “Leave not a single blade of grass, let the six roots of desire be torn out. All must be shaven clean away, lest they manifest themselves again,” he intoned. “Off with it,” he ordered.

The barber quickly finished the job. Presenting the certificate to the abbot, the elder requested him to select a name by which Lu Da should be know in the Buddhist order.

“A spark from the soul is worth more than a thousand pieces of gold,” the abbot chanted. “Our Buddhist Way is great and wide. Let him be called Sagacious.”

The scribe filled out the certificate and handed it to Sagacious Lu. At the abbot's direction he was given his monk's garments and told to put them on. Then he was led to the dais. The abbot placed his hand on Lu's head and instructed him in the rules of conduct.

“Take refuge in Buddha, the Law and the Monastic Order. These are the three refuges. Do not kill, steal, fornicate, drink or lie. These are the five precepts.”

Lu Da didn't know he was supposed to answer “I shall” to each of the first three and “I shall not” to each of the last five.

“I'll remember,” he said.

Everyone laughed.

Squire Zhao invited all present into the assembly hall where he burned incense and offered a vegetarian feast to the Buddhist gods. He gave gifts to every member of the monastery staff, high or low. The deacon introduced Sagacious to various members of the monastery, then conducted him to the rear building where the monks meditated. Nothing further happened that night.

The next day, Squire Zhao decided to leave. He said goodbye to the abbot, who tried in vain to keep him. After breakfast, all the monks went with him as far as the monastery gate. Squire Zhao placed his palms together and said, “Abbot, teachers, be compassionate. My young cousin Lu is a crude, direct fellow. If he forgets his manners or says anything offensive or breaks any rules, please forgive him, as a favor to me.”

“Don't worry, Squire,” said the abbot. “I shall teach him gradually to recite the prayers and scriptures, perform services, and practise meditation.”

“In the days to come I will show my gratitude,” promised the squire. He called Lu over to a pine tree and spoke to him in a low voice: “Your life must be different from now on, brother. Be restrained in all things, under no circumstances be proud. Otherwise, it will be hard for us to see each other

again. Take good care of yourself. I'll send you warm clothing from time to time.”

“No need to tell me, brother,” said Lu. “I'll behave.”

The squire took his leave of the abbot and the monks, got into his sedan-chair and set off down the mountain for home. His vassals followed, carrying the other, now empty, sedan-chair and boxes. The abbot and the monks returned to the monastery.

When Lu got back to the meditation room, he threw himself down on his bed and went to sleep. The monks meditating on either side shook him into wakefulness.

“You can't do that,” they said. “Now that you're a monk, you're supposed to learn how to sit and meditate.”

“If I want to sleep, what's it to you?” Lu demanded.

“Evil!” exclaimed the monks.

“What's this talk about eels? It's turtles I like to eat.”

“Oh, bitter!”

“There's nothing bitter about them Turtle belly is fat and sweet. They make very good eating.”

The monks gave up. They let him sleep.

The next day they wanted to complain to the abbot. But the elder advised against it. He said: “The abbot is only covering up his faults when he says he will attain sainthood and that none of us is his equal. But there's nothing we can do about it. Just don't bother with him.”

The monks went back. Since no one reprimanded him, Sagacious sprawled out on his bed every night and slept snoring thunderously. When he had to relieve himself he made a terrible racket getting up. He pissed and crapped behind one of the halls. His filth was all over the place.

The abbot's assistant reported the matter. “That Lu has no manners. He's not in the least like a man who's left the material world. How can we keep a fellow like that in the monastery?”

“Nonsense,” retorted the abbot. “Don't forget our donor's request. Sagacious will change later on.”

No one dared argue.

And so, Sagacious Lu remained in the monastery on Mount Wutai. Before he knew it, four or five months had passed. It was early winter and Lu's mind, which had been quiescent for a long time, began to stir. One clear day he put on his black cloth cassock, fastened his raven-dark girdle, changed into monk's shoes, and strode from the monastery.

Halfway down the mountain he halted to rest in a pavilion. He sat down on a low “goose neck” bench and said to himself with a curse: “In the old days I had good meat and drink every day. But now that I'm a monk I'm shrivelling up from starvation. Squire Zhao hasn't sent me anything to eat for a long time. My mouth is absolutely tasteless. If only I could get some wine.”

He saw in the distance a man carrying two covered buckets on a shoulder-pole. A ladle in his hand, the man trudged up the slope singing this song:

Before Mount Nine Li an old battlefield lies,

There cowherds find ancient spears and knives,

As a breeze stirs the waters of the Wu River broad,

We recall Lady Yu's farewell to her lord.

Lu watched him approach. The man entered the pavilion and put down his load.

“Hey, fellow, what have you got in those buckets?” Lu asked.

“Good wine.”

“How much a bucket?”

“Are you serious, monk, or are you just kidding?”

“Why should I kid you?”

“This wine is for the monastery's cooks, janitors, sedan-chair carriers, caretakers, and field laborers—no one else. The abbot has warned me that if I sell to a monk he'll take back the money and house the monastery loaned me for my winery. I don't dare sell you any of this.”

“You really won't?”

“Not if you kill me!”

“I won't kill you, but I will buy some of your wine.”

The man didn't like the look of things. He picked up his carrying-pole and started to walk away. Lu dashed out of the pavilion after him, seized the pole with both hands, and kicked the fellow in the groin. The man clapped both hands to his injured parts and dropped to a squatting position. He couldn't straighten up for some time.

Sagacious Lu carried both buckets to the pavilion. He picked the ladle off the ground, removed the covers, and began drinking. Before long, one of the buckets was empty.

“Come around to the monastery tomorrow and I'll pay you,” he said.

The man had just recovered from his pain. If the abbot found out, it would mean an end to his livelihood. How could he seek payment from Lu at the monastery? Swallowing his anger, he separated the remaining wine into two half-buckets. Then he shouldered the load, took the ladle and flew down the mountain.

Lu sat in the pavilion a long time. The wine had gone to his head. He left the pavilion, sat down beneath a pine tree and again rested for quite a spell. The wine was taking increasing effect. He pulled his arms out of his cassock and tied the empty sleeves around his waist. His tattooed back bare, he strode up the mountain, swinging his arms.

The monastery gate-keepers had been watching him from afar. They came forward when he approached and barred his way with their split bamboo staves.

“You're supposed to be a disciple of Buddha,” they barked. “How dare you come here in this besotted condition? You must be blind. Haven't you seen the notice? Any monk who breaks the rules and drinks gets forty blows of the split bamboo and is expelled from the monastery. Any gate-keeper who lets a drunken man enter gets ten blows. Go back down the mountain, quickly, if you want to save yourself a beating.”

In the first place, Lu was a new monk, in the second, his temper hadn't changed. Glaring, he shouted: “Mother-screwing thieves! So you want to beat me? I'll smash you!”

The situation looked bad. One of the gate-keepers sped back inside and reported to the supervisor, while the other tried to keep Sagacious out with his staff. Lu flipped it aside and gave him a staggering slap in the face. As the man struggled to recover, Lu followed with a punch that knocked him groaning to the ground.

“I'll let you off this time, varlet,” said Sagacious. He walked unsteadily into the monastery.

The supervisor had summoned the caretakers, cooks, janitors and sedan-chair carriers—nearly thirty men. Now, armed with staves, they poured out of the western cloister and rushed to meet Lu. The ex-major strode towards them with a thunderous roar. They didn't know he had been an army officer. He sprang at them so fiercely they fled in confusion into the sutra hall and closed the latticed door. Sagacious charged up the steps. With one punch and one kick he smashed the door open. The trapped men raised their staves and came out fighting.

The abbot, who had been notified by the supervisor, hurried to the scene with four or five attendants.

“Sagacious,” he shouted, “I forbid you to misbehave.”

Lu was drunk, but he recognized the abbot. He cast aside his staff, advanced and greeted him.

“I had a couple of bowls of wine, but I did nothing to provoke these fellows,” said Sagacious. “They came with a gang and attacked me.”

“If you have any respect for me,” said the abbot, “you'll go to your quarters at once and sleep it off. We'll talk about this tomorrow.”

“It's only my respect for you that stops me from lambasting those scabby donkeys!”

The abbot told his assistant to help Lu to the monks' hall. He collapsed on his bed and slept, snoring loudly.

A crowd of monks surrounded the abbot. “We told you so,” they said. “Now you see what's happened? How can we keep a wildcat like that in our monastery? He upsets our pure way of life.”

“It's true he's a bit unruly,” the abbot admitted, “but he'll become a saint later on. At present, we can do nothing. We must forgive him, for the sake of our donor, Squire Zhao. I'll give him good lecture tomorrow, and that will be the end of it.”

The monks laughed coldly. “Our abbot isn't very bright,” they said among themselves. All retired to their respective abodes.

The next morning the abbot sent his assistant to the monks' quarters to summon Sagacious Lu. He was still asleep. The assistant waited while he got up and put on his cassock. Suddenly, Lu dashed out, barefoot. The surprised assistant followed. He found Lu pissing behind the temple. The assistant couldn't help laughing. He waited till Lu had finished, then said:

“The abbot wants to see you.”

Lu went with him to the cleric's room.

“Although you originally were a military man,” said the abbot, “I ordained you because of Squire Zhao's sponsorship. I instructed you: Do not kill, steal, fornicate, drink or lie. These are the five precepts by which all monks are bound. First of all, no monk is allowed to drink. But yesterday evening you came back drunk and beat up the gate-keepers, broke the vermilion latticed door of the surra hall and drove out the cooks and janitors, shouting and yelling all the while. How could you behave so disgracefully?”

Lu knelt before him. “I'll never do such things again.”

“You're a monk now,” the abbot continued. “How could you violate our rule against drinking and upset our pure way of life? If it weren't for the sake of your sponsor Squire Zhao I'd expel you from the monastery. Don't you ever act like that again.”

Lu placed his palms together. “I wouldn't dare,” he asserted fervently.

The abbot ordered breakfast for him and, with many kindly words, exhorted him to reform. He gave Lu a cassock of fine cloth and a pair of monk's shoes, and told him to return to his quarters.

Topers should never drink their fill. “Wine can spur action, or ruin everything,” as the old saying goes. If drinking makes the timid brave, what does it do to the bold and impetuous?

For three or four months after his drunken riot Lu didn't venture to leave the monastery. Then one day the weather suddenly turned warm. It was the second lunar month. Lu came out of his quarters, strolled through the monastery gate and stood gazing in admiration at the beauty of Mount Wutai. From the foot of the mountain the breeze brought the sound of the clanging of metal. Sagacious returned to his quarters, got some silver and put it inside his cassock near his chest. Then he ambled down the slope.

He passed through an archway inscribed with the words: “Wutai, a Blessed Place.” Before him he saw a market town of six or seven hundred families. Meat, vegetables, wine and flour were on sale.

“What am I waiting for?” Lu said to himself. “If I had known there was a place like this, instead of snatching that fellow's bucket I would have come down and bought my own wine. I've been holding back so long that it hurts. Let's see what sort of food they have on sale here.”

Again he heard the clang of metal.

Next to a building with the sign “Father and Son Inn” was an ironsmith's shop. The sound was coming from there. Lu walked over. There men were beating iron.

“Got any good steel, master smith?” he asked the eldest of them.

The man was a little frightened at the sight of Lu's face, with newly sprouted bristles sticking out wildly all over. He ceased his hammering and said: “Please have a seat, Reverend. What kind of work do you want done?”

“I need a Buddhist staff and a monk's knife. Do you have any first-rate metal?”

“I do indeed. How heavy a staff and knife do you want? We'll make them according to your requirements.”

“The staff should be a hundred catties.”

“Much too heavy,” the smith laughed. “I could make it for you, but you'd never be able to wield it. Even Guan Gong's halberd wasn't more than eighty-one catties!”

“I'm every bit as good as Guan Gong,” Sagacious burst out impatiently. “He was only a man, too.”

“I mean well, Reverend. Even forty-five catties would be very heavy.”

“You say Guan Gong's halberd was eighty-one catties? Make me a staff of that weight, then.”

“Too thick, Reverend. It would look ugly, and be clumsy to use. Take my advice, let me make you a sixty-two catty Buddhist staff of burnished metal.

Of course, if it's too heavy, don't blame me. For the knife, as I said, we don't need any specifications. I'll use the best steel."

"How much for the two?"

"We don't bargain. You can have them at rock-bottom—five ounces of silver for both."

"It's a deal. If you do a good job, I'll give you more."

The smith accepted the silver. "We'll start right away."

"I have some small change here. Come out and have a bowl of wine with me."

"Excuse me, Reverend. I must get on with my work. I can't keep you company."

Sagacious Lu left the ironsmith's. Before he had gone thirty paces, he saw a wine shop banner sticking out from the eaves of a house. He raised the hanging door screen, entered the shop, sat down, and pounded on the table.

"Bring wine," he shouted.

The proprietor came up to him. "Forgive me, Reverend. My shop and investment money all are borrowed from the monastery. The abbot has a rule for us tavern keepers. If any of us sells wine to a monk, he takes back the money and drives us out of our premises. Don't hold it against me.

"All I want is a little wine. I won't say I bought it here."

"Impossible. Please try some place else. I'm sorry."

Lu rose to his feet. "If another place serves me, I'll have something to say to you later!"

He left the wine shop and walked on. Soon he saw another wine flag suspended over a doorway. He went in, sat down and called:

“Wine, host. Be quick.”

“How can you be so ignorant, Reverend?” the tavern keeper demanded. “You must know the abbot's rules. Do you want to ruin me?”

Sagacious insisted on being served, but the tavern keeper was adamant. Lu had no choice but to leave. He went to four or five more wine shops. All refused to serve him.

“If I don't think of something, I'll never get any wine,” he said to himself. At the far end of the market-place he saw amid blossoming apricot trees a small house from which a bundle of broom straw was hanging. He came closer and found it was a little wine shop. Lu went in and sat down by the window.

“Host,” he called, “bring wine for a wandering monk.”

The rustic owner came over and scrutinized him. “Where are you from, Reverend?”

“I'm a travelling monk who's just passing through. I want some wine.”

“If you're from the Mount Wutai monastery, I'm not allowed to sell you any.”

“I'm not. Now bring on the wine.”

Lu's appearance and manner of speaking struck the rustic owner as odd. “How much do you want?”

“Never mind about that. Just keep bringing it by the bowlful.”

Lu consumed ten big bowls of wine. “Have you any meat?” he asked. “I want a platter.”

“I had some beef earlier in the day,” said the proprietor, “but it's all sold out.”

Sagacious caught a whiff of the fragrance of cooking meat. He went into the yard and found a dog boiling in an earthenware pot by the compound wall.

“You've got dog meat,” he said. “Why won't you sell me any?”

“I thought as a monk you wouldn't eat it, so I didn't ask.”

“I've plenty of money here.” Lu pulled out some silver and handed it over. “Bring me half.”

The proprietor cut off half the dog carcass and placed it on the table with a small dish of garlic sauce. Lu tore into it delightedly with both hands. At the same time he consumed another ten bowls of wine. He found the wine very agreeable and kept calling for more. The shop owner was dumbfounded.

“That's enough, monk,” he urged.

Lu glared at him. “I'm paying for what I drink. Who's asking you to interfere?”

“How much more do you want?”

“Bring me another bucketful.”

The host had no choice but to comply. Before long, Sagacious had downed this, too. A dog's leg that he hadn't finished he put inside his cassock.

“Hold on to the extra silver,” he said as he was leaving. “I'll be back for more tomorrow.”

The frightened proprietor could only helplessly gape. He watched as Lu headed towards Mount Wutai.

Halfway up the slope, Lu sat down in the pavilion and rested. The wine began to take effect. Leaping up, he cried: “I haven't had a good workout in a long time, I'm getting stiff and creaky in the joints. What I need is a little exercise.”

Lu came out of the pavilion. He gripped the end of each sleeve in the opposite hand and swung his arms vigorously up and down, left and right, with increasing force. One arm accidentally struck against a post of the pavilion. There was loud crack as the post snapped. Half the pavilion collapsed.

Two gate-keepers heard the noise and climbed to a high vantage point for a look. They saw Lu staggering up the slope.

“Woe,” they exclaimed. “That brute is soused again!”

They closed the gate and barred it. Peering through a crack, they watched Lu advance. When he found the gate locked, he drummed on it with his fists. But the gate-keepers didn't dare let him in.

Lu pounded a while, in vain. Suddenly he noticed a Buddhist guardian idol on the left side of the gate.

“Hey, you big worthless fellow,” Lu shouted. “Instead of helping me knock on the gate, you raise your fist and try to scare me! I'm not afraid of you!”

He jumped on the pedestal and ripped up the railing as easily as pulling scallions. Grabbing a broken post, he flailed it against the idol's leg, bringing down a shower of gilt and plaster.

“Woe,” cried the gate-keepers. They ran to inform the abbot.

Lu paused, then turned and observed the guardian idol on the right.

“How dare you open your big mouth and laugh at me?” he yelled. He leaped on the pedestal and struck the idol's leg two hard blows. The figure toppled to the ground with a thunderous crash.

Lu laughed uproariously, holding the broken post in his hand.

When the gate-keepers notified the abbot he merely said: “Don't provoke him. Go back to your gate.”

At that moment, the elder, the supervisor, the deacon, and other responsible monks entered the hall. “That wildcat is very drunk,” they said. “He's wrecked the mid-slope pavilion and the guardian idols at the gate. How can we put up with this?”

“Since ancient times it's been known that 'Even a king shuns a drunkard.' All the more necessary for me to avoid them,” replied the abbot. “If he's broken idols, we'll ask his sponsor Squire Zhao to make us new ones. Zhao can repair the pavilion too. Let Sagacious do as he wishes.”

“Those guardian idols are the lords of the gate,” the monks protested. “You can't change them around just like that.”

“Never mind the gate idols,” retorted the abbot. “Even if they were the idols of the leading Buddhas themselves that were destroyed, there'd be nothing we could do about it. Stay out of his way. Didn't you see how savage he was the other day?”

“What a muddle-headed abbot,” the monks muttered as they left the hall. “Don't open that gate,” they instructed the gate-keepers. “Just stand inside and listen.”

“If you mother-screwing scabby donkeys don't let me in,” bellowed Sagacious, “I'll set fire to this stinking monastery and burn it down!”

“Remove the bar and let the beast in,” the monks hastily called to the gate-keepers. “If we don't, he's really liable to do it!”

The gate-keepers tiptoed up to the gate, pulled the bolt, then flew back and hid themselves. The other monks scattered.

Lu pushed hard against the gate with both hands. Unexpectedly, it gave way, and he stumbled in and fell flat on his face. He crawled to his feet, rubbed his head, and hurried to his quarters.

He pushed aside the door curtain and plunged into the meditation room. The monks, who were sitting cross-legged on their pallets, looked up, startled. They immediately lowered their heads. On reaching his own pallet,

Sagacious noisily vomited. The stench was frightful. “Virtue be praised,” cried the monks, holding their noses.

Lu clambered onto his pallet and opened his cassock and girdle, ripping them in the process. The dog's leg dropped to the floor. “Good,” said Sagacious. “I was just getting hungry:” He picked it up and began to eat.

The monks hid their faces behind their sleeves. Those nearest him stayed as far out of his way as possible. Lu tore off a piece of dog meat and offered it to the monk on his left.

“Try it,” he recommended.

The man pressed his sleeve ends tightly against his lips.

“Don't you want any?” asked Lu. He shoved the meat at the man on his right. The fellow tried to slip off his pallet and escape, but Sagacious seized him by the ear and crammed the meat into his mouth.

Four or five monks on the opposite side of the room jumped up and hurried over. They pleaded with Lu to desist. He flung aside his dog's haunch and drummed his knuckles on their shaven pates. The whole meditation room was thrown into an uproar. Monks got their cassocks and bowls from the closets and quickly left. There was a general exodus. The elder couldn't stop them.

Cheerfully, Sagacious fought his way out. Most of the monks fled to the cloisters. This time the supervisor and deacon didn't notify the abbot, but summoned all the monks on duty, including every caretaker, cook, janitor and sedan-chair carrier they could muster—nearly two hundred men in all. These bound their heads with bandannas, armed themselves with clubs and staves, and marched on the monks' hall.

Lu let out a roar when he saw them. Not having any weapon he ran into the meditation room, knocked over the altar table in the front of the idol of Buddha, tore off two of the table legs, and charged out again.

He came at the attackers so fiercely that they hastily retreated to the cloisters. Sagacious advanced, flourishing his table legs. His adversaries closed in on him from both sides. Lu was furious. He feinted east and struck west, he feinted south and thumped north. Only those furthest away escaped his cudgels.

Right to the door or the preaching hall the battle raged. Then the voice of the abbot rang out: “Sagacious, stop that fighting! You, too, you monks!”

The attackers had suffered, several dozen injured. They were glad to fall back when the abbot appeared. Lu threw down his table legs.

“Abbot, help me,” he cried. By now he was eight-tenths sober.

“Sagacious, you're giving me too much trouble,” said the cleric. “The last time you got drunk and raised a rumpus I wrote your sponsor Squire Zhao about it and he sent a letter of apology. Now you've disgraced yourself again, upset our pure way of life, wrecked the pavilion and damaged two idols. All this we can overlook. But you drove the monks from the meditation room, and that's a major crime. Wenshu Buddha meditated where out monastery stands today. For centuries these hallowed grounds have known only tranquillity and the fragrance of incense. It's no place for a dirty fellow like you. The next few days, you stay with me in the abbot's hall. I'll arrange for you to be transferred elsewhere.”

The former major went with the abbot to his residence. The cleric told the supervisor to send the monks back to their meditations. Those who had been injured were to go and rest. Sagacious spent the night in the abbot's hall.

The next morning the abbot consulted with the elder. They decided to give Lu some money and send him on. But first it was necessary to notify Squire Zhao. The abbot wrote a letter and dispatched it to his manor with two messengers, who were instructed to wait for his reply.

Zhao was quite upset by the abbot's missive. In his answer he hailed the cleric respectfully and said: “I will pay for the repair of the broken gate guardians and the pavilion, Lu must go wherever the abbot sends him.”

The abbot then directed his assistant to prepare a black cloth cassock, a pair of monk's shoes, and ten ounces of silver, and to summon Lu.

“Sagacious,” said the abbot, “the last time you got drunk and made a disturbance in the monks' hall, you didn't know any better. This time you got drunk again, broke the guardian idols, wrecked the pavilion, and caused a riot in the hall of meditation. That's a serious crime. You've also injured many of our monks. Our monastery is a peaceful place. Your conduct is very bad. As a courtesy to Squire Zhao I'm giving you a letter of introduction to another place where you can stay. It's impossible for us to keep you here. Last night I had a vision and composed a four-phrase prophecy to guide your destiny.”

“Where do you want me to go, teacher?” asked Lu. “Please tell me the prophecy.”

The abbot pointed at Sagacious Lu and spoke. He told him where to go, with this result: Laughing and wielding his staff, Lu fought scores of heroes. Angrily stabbing with his sword, he struck down unfilial sons and treacherous officials.

What, exactly, did the abbot say to Sagacious Lu? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 5
Drunk, the Little King Raises the Gold-Spangled Bed Curtains
Lu the Tattooed Monk Throws Peach Blossom Village into Confusion

“Sagacious,” said the abbot, “you definitely can't stay here. In the Eastern Capital a Buddhist brother of mine, called the Lucid Teacher, is the abbot of the Great Xiangguo Monastery. Take this letter to him and ask him to find you a job. Last night I had a vision and composed a four-line prophetic verse to guide your destiny. You must remember these words.”

Kneeling before him, Lu said: “I'd like to hear the prophecy.”

The abbot intoned: “Take action in the forest, prosper in the mountains, flourish amid the waters, but halt at the river.”

Sagacious kowtowed to the abbot nine times, shouldered his knapsack, tied bundles round his waist, and placed the letter in a pocket. He bid farewell to the abbot and the monks, left Mount Wutai, put up in the inn next door to the ironsmith and waited for his staff and sword. The monks were glad to be rid of him. The abbot told the lay brothers to clean up the wreckage of the guardian idols and the pavilion. A few days later Squire Zhao brought some money personally and had the idols and pavilion repaired. Of this we'll say no more.

Sagacious waited several days at the inn. When his two weapons were finished, he made a sheath for the knife and had the staff painted. He gave some extra silver to the smith, shouldered his knapsack, hung the knife at his waist, took up the staff, bid farewell to the innkeeper and the ironsmith, and set forth.

“What a tough-looking monk,” people on meeting him thought.

He took the road for the Eastern Capital and travelled for more than half a month. Lu didn't stop at any monasteries. He always spent the night at inns and ate in taverns during the day.

As he was walking along one afternoon he became so absorbed in the beauty of the hills and streams that he failed to notice the lateness of the hour. Suddenly he realized he'd never reach the next inn before dark, and he had no travelling companion. Where could he spend the night?

He hastened on another twenty or thirty *li*. While crossing a wooden bridge he observed in the distance, shimmering beneath scarlet sunset clouds, a manor house in a grove of trees. Behind it rose massive tumbling mountains.

“I'd better put up for the night in the manor,” Lu said to himself.

As he drew near, he saw scores of peasants busily moving things from one place to another. At the entrance to the manor he rested his staff and hailed

a few vassals.

“What brings you to our manor this evening, monk?” they asked.

“I couldn't reach an inn before dark,” he replied. “I hope your manor will put me up for the night. I'll be moving on tomorrow morning.”

“We're busy tonight. You can't stay.”

“It's only for one night. Tomorrow, I'll leave.”

“Hurry along, monk. Don't hang around here if you want to live.”

“That's strange talk. Why such a fuss about spending one night? What's so dangerous?”

“Get going. Otherwise you're liable to be seized and bound.”

Sagacious lost his temper. “Can't you oafs be civil? I haven't said a word against you, and you threaten to tie me up!”

Some of the peasants swore at him, others tried to calm him. Lu raised his staff to sail into them when an old man emerged from the manor. About sixty, he walked with a staff higher than his head.

“What are you rowing about?” he shouted at his vassals as he approached.

“That wretched monk wants to hit us,” they replied.

“I'm on my way to the Eastern Capital from Mount Wutai,” said Lu. “I couldn't reach an inn and I asked to stay the night in the manor. But these surly louts want to tie me up.”

“Since you're a reverend from Mount Wutai,” said the old man, “come with me.”

Sagacious followed him into the main building where they took their seats as host and guest. “Our peasants didn't know you were from the place of the living Buddha, Reverend,” said the old man. “Don't hold it against them.

They thought you were an ordinary monk. I myself have always respected Buddha, his teachings, and his disciples. Although we're busy tonight, we shall be glad to put you up."

Lu rested his staff, stood up and bowed respectfully. "Thank you, patron. May I ask you honorable name?"

"Our family name is Liu. Because this place is called Peach Blossom Village, the peasants refer to me as Grandpa Liu of Peach Blossom Village. May I ask the reverend's name, and what he is called in the Buddhist order?"

"My surname is Lu. Our abbot gave me the Buddhist title of Sagacious."

"Please have dinner with us, Reverend. Are you a meat abstainer by any chance?"

"I'm not opposed to wine or meat. The wine can be clear or cloudy. Beef or dog meat, I eat them all."

"Since you have no special scruples, I'll have my vassals serve you meat and wine."

A table was set up, and chopsticks laid out. Vassals brought Sagacious a platter of beef and three or four kinds of vegetables. He put aside the bundles which had been tied around his waist and sat himself at the festive board. A vassal warmed the wine and filled Sagacious' cup. The monk didn't need to be coaxed. In a trice he finished off both the pot of wine and the platter of meat. Grandpa Liu, sitting opposite, stared at him in amazement. Rice was brought. Sagacious consumed this as well.

Finally, the table was removed. "Please make yourself comfortable in the wing next door. Reverend," said the old man. "If you hear any noise during the night, don't come out whatever you do."

"Would you mind telling me what's going on here tonight?"

“It's not the sort of thing to discuss with a person who's disowned the material world.”

“Why are you looking so unhappy, grandpa? Has my coming here put you to too much bother? Tomorrow, reckon up what I owe you and I'll pay.

“Hear me, Reverend. We give food and shelter to monks often. What difference does one more make? The trouble is my daughter is getting married tonight, and bringing a son-in-law into the family.”

Sagacious laughed. “Men and women all must marry. It's an important event in every person's life and perfectly normal. What is there to be upset about?”

“You don't understand, Reverend. We don't want this marriage.”

“Silly old man,” Lu smiled. “If you aren't willing, why did you agree?”

“I have no other children, and my daughter's only nineteen. Not far from here is a height called Peach Blossom Mountain. Two chieftains built a stronghold on it recently with six or seven hundred men. They pillage and rob, but the police of Qingzhou haven't been able to stop them. A few days ago they came to our manor to collect tribute, and one of the chieftains saw my daughter. He gave me twenty ounces of gold and a bolt of red satin as an engagement pledge, and chose tonight for the wedding. He said they would be married here in the manor. I had no way of opposing him. I had to consent. That's why I'm upset. It's not that I don't welcome you, Reverend.”

“So that's how it is. Suppose I reasoned with him and convinced him not to marry your daughter, how would that be?”

“He's a rogue who kills without batting an eye. How can you make him change his mind?”

“When I was on Mount Wutai I learned the Buddhist Laws of Logic from the abbot. Now I can talk a man around even if he's hard as iron. Tell your daughter to hide. I'll reason with the groom in her chamber and get him to call the marriage off.”

“It sounds all right, but be sure you don't tweak the tiger's whiskers.”

“I want to live too, don't I? Just leave everything to me.”

“That's fine. How lucky my family is to have a Buddha like you come down from Heaven!”

The vassals were startled to hear of this arrangement.

“Would you like some more to eat?” this old man asked.

“I don't want any more food,” said Lu, “but if you still have some wine you might give me a little.”

“We've plenty,” Grandpa Liu assured him. He told a vassal to bring a cooked goose and a large wine bowl. Sagacious drank twenty or thirty bowls of wine and finished the goose. A vassal was directed to put his bundles in a guest-room.

Lu took up his staff and knife. “Has your daughter hidden herself, grandpa?” he asked his host.

“I've sent her to a neighbor's.”

“Let's go to the bridal chamber, then.”

The old man led him to the door of a room. “It's in there.”

“Now you can all go about your business.”

Grandpa Liu and his vassals went out to prepare the wedding feast. Sagacious pushed aside all the tables and chairs in the room. He put his knife at the head of the bed and leaned his staff against the bedside. Lowering the gold-spangled bed curtains, he stripped to the buff, jumped into the bed and sat there.

It was growing dark. Grandpa Liu ordered his vassals to light lamps in the front and rear of the house. A long table with incense, lamps and candles

was set up on the threshing ground. The old man called for large patters of meat and a big pot of warmed wine.

Around the first watch the sound of drums and gongs was heard on the mountainside. Grandpa Liu, worried about his ruse, and the vassals, sweating with apprehension, went out of the manor gate to look.

In the distance forty or fifty torches, turning the night as bright as day, revealed a troop of men, on horse and afoot, speeding towards the manor. Grandpa Liu shouted for his vassals to open the gate wide, and went forward to meet them. The crowding, jostling throng bore gleaming weapons bedecked with ribbons. Wildflowers adorned the hair of the lesser bandits. Four or five red gauze lanterns at the head of the procession illuminated the mounted brigand chieftain. On his head was a peaked hat, indented in front, of pale red, with a lifelike silk flower tucked under it beside his ear. His powerful frame was draped in a green silk robe embroidered with gold thread, bordered with wool, and bound at the waist by a gold-spangled red sash. He wore high-heeled leather boots and rode a big white horse with a curly mane.

At the manor gate the chieftain dismounted. His men crowded round and congratulated him. “In a shiny new hat, tonight you'll be a bridegroom. In well-fitting clothes, tonight you'll be a son-in-law.”

Grandpa Liu hurried forward with a cup of good wine on a tray, and knelt before the bandit chief. The vassals did the same. The chieftain raised the old man to his feet.

“You are my father-in-law. You shouldn't kneel to me.”

“Don't say that,” Grandpa Liu replied. “I'm only one of the subjects in the great chief's domain.”

The chieftain, who was already eight-tenths drunk, laughed heartily. “You won't lose out by taking me as a son-in-law. I'm the right match for your daughter.”

The old man presented him with the ceremonial cup of wine for the dismounting guest, then led him to the lamp-lit table on the threshing ground. “You shouldn't have arranged such an elaborate welcome, father-in-law,” the brigand protested courteously.

He drank three more cups and proceeded to the reception hall. He instructed his men to tie the horses to some willows. Several of the bandits began beating drums and gongs outside the hall.

The chieftain seated himself. “Father-in-law, where is my wife?” he asked the old man.

“She doesn't dare come out. She's too shy.”

The brigand laughed. “Bring more wine. I must offer you a return toast.” But when he took his cup in hand he said: “I want to see my bride first. I'll drink with you later.”

Grandpa Liu was anxious to have the monk reason with him. “I'll show you to her room,” he replied. Holding a lighted candle, he escorted the chieftain around a screen to the door of the bridal chamber. “This is it,” he said. “Please go in.” He departed with his candle. Not at all sure their plan would succeed, he wanted to get out of the way, fast.

The chieftain pushed open the door. Inside it was pitch dark. “That father-in-law of mine is a frugal manager,” he muttered. “He doesn't even light a lamp and leaves my bride sitting in the dark. I must have my men bring him a keg of oil from our mountain stronghold tomorrow.”

Sagacious Lu, seated behind the bed curtains, muffled his laughter. He didn't utter a sound. The brigand felt his way to the center of the room.

“Wife,” he exclaimed, “come out and greet me. Don't be shy. Tomorrow I'll install you as mistress of the fortress.” Calling to his “wife,” he groped forward until he touched the gold-spangled bed curtains. He opened them and thrust his hand inside. It brushed against Lu's belly. The monk promptly seized the chieftain by the head, hat and all, and pushed him down, struggling, on the bed. Sagacious clenched his right hand into a fist.

“Mother-raping thief,” shouted the monk, and struck him a blow on the neck and ear.

“How can you hit your master?” cried the bandit chief.

“I'm teaching you to recognize your mistress,” retorted Sagacious. He hauled him off the bed and pummelled and kicked him.

“Help!” howled the bandit.

Outside, Grandpa Liu was paralyzed with shock, for the cry came at the very moment he was sure Sagacious was reasoning with the chieftain. The old man took up a lamp and hurried into the room, followed by a swarm of bandits. They saw a big stout monk, without a stitch of clothes on, seated astride their chieftain beside the bed and thumping him vigorously.

“Save our chief,” shouted the bandit in the lead. The others rushed at Sagacious, cudgels and lances in hand.

The monk pushed the chieftain aside, snatched his staff from the bedside, and charged. He attacked so fiercely that the bandits cried out and fled. The old man could only exclaim in dismay.

In the excitement, the chieftain crawled out of the room, ran to the front gate, and groped his way to an unsaddled horse. He broke a branch from a willow, leaped on the animal's back and flailed with his improvised whip. The beast didn't move.

“Woe is me,” thought the bandit leader. “This horse is tormenting me too!” Then he looked, and saw that in his haste he had forgotten to untie the rein from the tree. Quickly, he ripped it loose, and dashed away, riding bare-back, at a gallop.

“Just wait, you old donkey,” he swore at the old man as he left the manor gate. “Don't think you're going to fly out of this!” He struck the animal another couple of blows with the switch. It scampered pell-mell up the mountain.

Grandpa Liu grasped Sagacious by the arm. “You've brought disaster down on my whole family, Reverend!” he groaned.

“Excuse my bad manners,” replied the monk. “Bring my clothes and cassock, then we can talk.”

A vassal went back to the room and fetched the garments, and Sagacious dressed.

“I was hoping that you would reason with him, persuade him to change his mind,” said the old man. “I never dreamed you were going to beat him up. He's sure to tell all about this when he gets back to the fortress. Now the bandits will come down in force and slaughter me and my family!”

“Don't worry, grandpa. To tell you the truth, I used to be a major in the border garrison of Old General Zhong in Yanan Prefecture. Because I killed a man, I had to become a monk. Two thousand mounted men wouldn't scare me, to say nothing of a few piddling bandit chiefs. Try and lift this staff, you fellows,” he said to the listening vassals, “if you don't believe me.”

Of course, none of them could do it. Sagacious picked up the staff and twirled it as if it were a lamp wick.

“You mustn't leave us, Reverend,” pleaded Grandpa Liu. “My family needs your protection!”

“That goes without saying. I wouldn't leave if my life depended on it.”

“Bring wine for the reverend,” the old man called. To Lu he said: “But don't drink yourself into a stupor.”

“When I'm one-tenth drunk I can use only one-tenth of my skill, but when I'm ten-tenths drunk I'm at the top of my form.”

“In that case, all right. I've plenty of wine and meat here. Have as much as you want.”

We'll speak now of the head bandit. Seated in his stronghold on Peach Blossom Mountain, he was about to send a man down to see how his

second in command was getting on with his wedding when a number of brigands, breathing hard and looking very distraught, rushed in, crying: “Woe, woe!”

“What's wrong?” he demanded quickly. “Why are you in such a pain?”

“Our number two chief has been beaten up!”

The startled leader began to question them. Voices outside exclaimed: “Number Two has come back!”

The head bandit looked. His lieutenant had lost his red hat, his green robe was ripped and tattered. Number Two dismounted and collapsed in front of the hall.

“Save me, brother, save me,” he pleaded.

“What happened?”

“I went down to the manor and entered the bridal chamber. That wretched old donkey had sent his daughter away and hid a big fat monk in her bed. Not suspecting a thing, I opened the bed curtains and felt around. The lout dragged me down and punched and kicked me till I was black and blue. When our men came to my rescue, he left me, grabbed his staff and went after them. Otherwise, I'd never have escaped with my life. You must avenge me, brother!”

“So that's how it was. You go inside and rest. I'll catch that scabby thief and bring him here,” said the head brigand. He called to his men: “Get my horse ready at once. All of you come with me.”

He mounted and took his lance in hand. With as many men as he could muster, he rode down the slope. Everyone was shouting and yelling.

To get back to Sagacious Lu. He was drinking in the manor when a vassal announced: “The head bandit is coming down the mountain with a big gang!”

“Don't worry,” said Lu. “As I knock them over, you fellows tie them up and take them to the magistrate and collect the rewards. Bring me my sword.”

Sagacious removed his cassock, tied up the skirts of his robe, and hung the sword on his belt. Staff in hand, he strode out to the threshing ground. In the light of many torches he saw the head bandit carrying a long lance, riding swiftly towards the manor.

“Where is that scabby donkey?” shouted the brigand chief. “Come out and settle this once and for all!”

“Dirty unflogged scoundrel,” swore Lu. “I'll teach you to know me!” Whirling his staff, he charged.

The chieftain parried his blow. “Hold off a minute, monk,” he cried. “Your voice is very familiar. What's your name?”

“I'm Lu Da, former major in the garrison of Old General Zhong, and nobody else. Now that I'm a monk, I'm called Sagacious Lu.”

The brigand laughed delightedly and rolled from his horse, tossing his weapon aside. He clasped his hands together and saluted.

“I hope you've been well since we parted. So it was you who gave my lieutenant that drubbing!”

At first the monk thought it was a trick. He leaped back a few paces and rested his staff. But when he got a good look at the man in the torchlight he saw it was none other than Tiger-Fighting General Li Zhong, who put on a show with weapons in the streets to sell his medicines.

Li Zhong took Sagacious by the arm. “What made you become a monk, brother?”

“I'll tell you about it inside.”

Grandpa Liu, watching, was dismayed. “So the monk is one of them, too,” he thought.

Lu went back into the manor house, put on his cassock, then led Li Zhong to the hall to talk over old times. The monk sat down in the middle of the hall and called to Grandpa Liu. But the old man didn't dare come forward.

“Don't be afraid of him, grandpa,” said Lu. “He's my brother.”

This alarmed the old man even more, and he continued to hang back. Li Zhong took the second-ranking seat. The old man then took the third.

“I will tell you my story, sirs,” said the monk. “After killing the 'Lord of the West' in Weizhou with three punches, I fled to Yanmen County in Daizhou Prefecture. There I met Old Jin whom I had saved and sent off to the Eastern Capital. He had gone to Yanmen in stead with a man he knew. His daughter was living with a rich landlord, Squire Zhao, who was very respectful to me the day we met. But the police were hot on my trail, so the squire paid out money and sent me to the abbot on Mount Wutai where I shaved off my hair and became a monk. Because I got drunk twice and rioted in the meditation room, the abbot has given me a letter to the head of the Great Xiangguo Monastery in the Eastern Capital, asking him to give me a job. Last night it was too late to find an inn, so I put up in this manor. I never thought I'd run into you, brother. Who is that fellow I beat up? And what are you doing here?”

“The day after I left you and Shi Jin at the tavern in Weizhou I heard that you had killed Butcher Zheng. I went to talk it over with Shi Jin, but he was gone. Then I heard that the police were after you, so I quickly left, too. I was passing the foot of the mountain here when that fellow you thrashed came down with a gang and attacked me. He's called Zhou Tong, the Little King, and has a stronghold on Peach Blossom Mountain. I defeated him, and he asked me to stay as lord of the fortress, and gave me the first throne. I've been an outlaw from that day on.”

“Since you're the leader, call off the marriage to Grandpa Liu's daughter. She's his only child, and he's been hoping she would look after him for the rest of his days. You can't take her and leave him alone.”

Grandpa Liu was very pleased. He had food and wine placed before his two guests. Each of the lesser bandits was served two steamed rolls, two slices

of meat, and a big bowl of wine. All ate their fill. Grandpa Liu also returned the engagement gifts of gold and satin.

“Take them, brother,” Sagacious urged Li Zhong. “I'm putting this whole matter in your hands.”

“That can be arranged,” said Li Zhong. “Please stay at our little stronghold a while, brother. Grandpa Liu, you must come too.”

The old man had his vassals prepare a sedan-chair for Sagacious Lu. They carried him off with his staff, knife and luggage. Li Zhong rode on horseback. Grandpa Liu went in a smaller sedan-chair. By then the morning was very light.

On reaching the fortress, Lu and the old man got out of their sedan-chairs and Li Zhong dismounted from his horse. The bandit chief left them to the assembly hall and all three took their seats.

Li Zhong summoned Zhou Tong to come forward. When Zhou Tong saw the monk he thought angrily: “Not only don't you avenge me, brother, but you invite him here and give him a seat of honor!”

“Do you know who this monk is, brother?” asked Li Zhong.

“If I knew who he was, maybe I wouldn't have been beaten!”

Li Zhong laughed. “Remember I told you about a man who killed the 'Lord of the West' with three blows of his fist? Well, that's this monk!”

Zhou Tong clutched his head, “Aiya!” he cried. He stepped forward and kowtowed. Sagacious returned his greeting. “Please don't hold our clash against me,” said the monk. The three took their seats, but the old man remained standing before them.

“Hear me, Brother Zhou,” said Lu. “There are some things you don't know about this match with Grandpa Liu's daughter. She's his only child. He needs her to look after him and carry on the family line. If you take her away in marriage, he'll have no one. In his heart I'm sure he's against that.

Give her up as a favor to me and choose another good girl. Here are the gold and satin engagement gifts. What do you say?”

“Since it's you who ask it, brother, I won't enter their gate again.”

“A real man never goes back on his word,” Sagacious reminded him.

Zhou Tong broke an arrow as a pledge. Grandpa Liu bowed his tanks, returned the gold and satin, and went back down the mountain to his manor.

Li Zhong and Zhou Tong had oxen killed and horses slaughtered and gave a feast. They entertained Sagacious for several days, showing him the scenic spots in the front and rear of the mountain. Peach Blossom Mountain was quite remarkable. Wild and foreboding in appearance, it had steep cliffs on all sides overgrown with tangled grass, and could only be climbed by a single path.

“A good place to defend,” said Sagacious.

Within a few days he realized that Li Zhong and Zhou Tong were not very generous, in fact they were rather stingy. He decided to leave. The two did their best to persuade him, but he refused to remain.

“I'm already a monk,” he explained. “I can't become a bandit.”

“If you insist on leaving, brother,” said the bandit chieftains, “we two will go down the mountain tomorrow. As much as we pick up, we'll give you for your travelling expenses.”

The next day pigs and sheep were slaughtered in the stronghold and a farewell feast was laid. When all was in readiness, many gold and silver wine goblets were placed on the table.

Just as the diners were about to sit down and start drinking, a bandit came in and reported: “There are two large carts and about a dozen travellers passing at the foot of the mountain.”

Li Zhong and Zhou Tong at once mustered their men, leaving only two to wait on Sagacious and serve him wine. “Brother,” said the brigand leaders,

“please have a few cups without us. We're going down to collect some riches. We'll join your farewell banquet later.” They left instructions with the bandits remaining with Sagacious and went down the mountain at the head of their men.

“What tight-wads,” thought Sagacious. “They don't give me any of this mass of gold and silver they've laid out here, but wait until they rob something and present me with that! It doesn't cost them anything. Only travellers on the public road have to suffer. I'm going to throw a scare into those oafs!”

He told the two bandits attending him to pour some wine, and he drank two cups. Suddenly, he jumped to his feet, knocked them down with one blow of the fist each, bound them with his sash, and gagged them with knots of hemp rope. He emptied his rucksack of everything except absolute essentials, then swept the gold and silver vessels from the table, trample them flat, and stuffed them in. He placed the abbot's letter in the bag containing his monk's certificate, which he wore on his chest. Sagacious hung the knife at his waist, took up his staff and left the stronghold with the sack on his head.

At the rear of the mountain he looked down the slope. It was steep and there was no path. “But if I leave by the front path,” he thought, “I'm sure to run into those varlets. I'd better roll down here where the grass is thick.”

He tied the sack and knife together, dropped them over the side, and tossed the staff down after them. Then he rolled down the slope, tumbling all the way to the foot of the mountain without injury. Sagacious jumped to his feet, found his sack, tied on his knife and picked up his staff. He selected a path and struck out in the direction of the Eastern Capital.

To get back to Li Zhong and Zhou Tong. On the side of the mountain they met the dozen or so travellers. All were armed. The brigand chiefs levelled their lances and their men moved forward. “If you have any sense,” yelled the bandits, “shell out and buy yourselves a free passage!”

One of the travellers, brandishing a halberd, rushed Li Zhong. They fought more than ten rounds, back and forth, neither vanquishing the other. Zhou

Tong, angered, ran up with a shout, the rest of the bandits following. The travellers couldn't withstand so many. They turned and fled. Some were too slow, and seven or eight were slain. The bandits seized the carts and valuables and slowly returned up the mountain, singing triumphantly.

When they reached the stronghold they found their two mates bound to a pillar. The gold and silver goblets which had been on the table were gone. Zhou Tong untied the two bandits and asked: “Where is Sagacious Lu?”

“He knocked us down and bound us,” they replied. “Then he wrapped the vessels and took them all away!”

“That scabby thief is no good,” said Zhou Tong. “He's played us dirty! Which way did he go?”

They searched until they found his prints leading to the rear of the mountain. They saw the flattened grass on the slope.

“He's an experienced crook, the scabby donkey,” said Zhou Tong. “Rolling down a steep incline like this!”

“Let's catch and question him,” Li Zhong proposed. “We'll put the rascal to shame!”

“Forget it,” said Zhou Tong. “There's no use locking the door after the thief is gone. Where would we look? Even if we talked to him we wouldn't get our things back. You and I are no match for him in a quarrel, and it would only make things awkward if we ran into him again later on. It's better to drop the whole business. In the future, if we meet, we can pretend nothing has happened. Let's open the packages on the carts. We'll divide the gold and silver and silks into three portions. You and I will each take one. The rest can be split among the men.”

“He's stolen a lot of things that belong to you,” said Li Zhong. “Since I was the one who brought him here, you take my share too.”

“Brother,” said Zhou Tong, “we're in this together, live or die. There's no need for petty reckonings between you and me.”

Reader, remember this well: From their lair on Peach Blossom Mountain, Li Zhong and Zhou Tong plundered and robbed.

As to Sagacious Lu, when he left the bandit fort he travelled from morning till afternoon, covering fifty or sixty *li*. He was hungry, but there were no taverns on the road.

“I set out early with no thought but to travel fast,” he said to himself. “I haven't had a thing to eat. Where can I find some food?”

He gazed all around. He heard, in the distance, the sound of bells. “Good,” he thought. “If it's not a Buddhist monastery, it's a Taoist temple. Those bells are hanging from the eaves and the breeze is making them tinkle. That's the place for me.”

If Sagacious hadn't gone there, more than ten lives wouldn't have been lost in the night and a famous ancient landmark on a sacred mountain wouldn't have been consumed in flames. But the result was: Red fire spewed from golden halls, black smoke curled in jade-green temples.

To which holy structures did Sagacious go? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 6
Nine Dragons Shi Jin Robs in Red Pine Forest
Sagacious Lu Burns Down Waguan Monastery

After crossing a number of ridges, Sagacious saw a path up the mountain through a large forest of pines. He followed it for less than half a *li* and arrived at a run-down monastery. It was from here that the tinkling of the bells came. Above an arch a faded vermilion sign read in letters of gold: “Waguan Monastery.” Lu proceeded another forty or fifty paces, crossed a stone bridge, and entered the compound. He went directly to the guest-quarters. Its front gate was gone and its surrounding walls had crumbled.

“A big monastery like this,” thought Sagacious. “How could it have deteriorated so?”

He went to the abbot's hall. It was filthy with swallow droppings. A cobwebbed lock secured its door. Lu pounded the ground with the end of his staff. “A passing monk wants some food,” he cried.

Sagacious shouted for a long time, but no one responded.

He walked around to the kitchen. There wasn't any cauldron. The earthen stove had collapsed. Lu untied his rucksack and placed it down before the idol of the kitchen god. Carrying his staff, he went on with his search. In the rear of the kitchen he found a small room in which a few old monks were sitting, their faces sallow and sunken.

“You monks are very rude,” said Lu. “I shouted and shouted but none of you answered.”

One of the monks waved his hand. “Keep your voice down.”

“I'm a monk who's just passing through and I want something to eat,” said Lu. “What's wrong with that?”

“We haven't eaten ourselves in three days. How can we find any food for you?”

“I'm from Mount Wutai. Even half a bowl of gruel would be all right.”

“We should feed you, since you're from the place of the living Buddha. But what can we do? All the other monks are gone and we don't have a single grain. We have really been hungry for the past three days.”

“Liars! I don't believe there's no grain in a big place like this.”

“It's true that our monastery was once prosperous. Wandering monks came from all over. Then one of them brought a Taoist priest and they took control. They ruined everything. There's nothing those two won't do. They drove all our monks away. Only we, who are too old to move, remained. That's why we have nothing to eat.”

“Liars! What do a single monk and a single priest amount to? Couldn't you have lodged a complaint with the government?”

“Reverend, you don't understand. We're a long way from any government office. Besides, even soldiers couldn't stop them. They're very fierce. Murder and arson mean nothing to them. They're living in a building behind the abbot's hall.”

“What are their names?”

“The monk is called Cui. His Buddhist title is Accomplished. His nickname is Cast Iron Buddha. The Taoist priest is named Qiu. His father called him Second Son. His nickname is Flying Messenger from Hell. Neither of them act like men who've renounced the material world. They're just robbers in the greenwood. They only use their priesthood as a cloak.”

As Sagacious was questioning the old monks he got a whiff of something fragrant. He took up his staff and went stealthily to the rear. There, on an earthen stove, steam was seeping through the reed cover of a pot. Sagacious raised the lid. Millet was simmering inside.

“You old monks are very rude,” he cried. “You say you haven't eaten for three days, but here you're heating a pot of gruel! Monks are supposed to speak the truth!”

Lu's discovery dismayed the old men. They hurriedly took away all the bowls, plates, dishes, ladles and buckets. Sagacious was hungry to distraction. He saw the gruel and he wanted to eat, but the monks had removed all the utensils. Next to the stove he noticed a chipped old painted table, covered with dust. “Necessity is the mother of invention.” Lu rested his staff, grabbed some straw from beside the stove, wiped the dust off, picked up the pot with both hands, and poured the gruel on the table.

The old monks rushed to snatch the porridge. Sagacious shoved and tripped them. Some fell, some ran away. Lu scooped gruel from the table and ate. He had just started when one of the old monks said:

“We haven't eaten in three days'. Only today we managed to beg this bit of millet and were making it into a little gruel, and now you're eating it!”

Lu had consumed no more than six or seven mouthfuls, but on hearing this, he stopped.

Outside, someone was singing mockingly. Lu washed his hands, took up his staff and went to take a look. On the other side of a crumbling wall he saw a Taoist priest, his head bound by a black bandanna, wearing a cloth robe tied at the waist by a girdle of many colors, and shod in hemp sandals. On his shoulder was a carrying-pole from one end of which hung a bamboo basket containing a few fish and some meat wrapped in a lotus leaf. A jug of wine, its mouth also covered by a lotus leaf, dangled from the other end. The priest was bawling this song:

In the east are you, in the west am I,

For you no husband, no wife for me.

Without any wife I can still get by,

Without a man how lonely you must be.

The old monks hurried over, waving their hands, and whispered to Sagacious: “That's the priest Flying Messenger from Hell, or Second Son Qiu!”

Sagacious grasped his staff and followed him. The man, unaware that he was being trailed, went through a door in the wall behind the abbot's compound. Lu did the same. Under a green locust tree he saw a table laid with platters of food, three wine cups and three pairs of chopsticks. A fat monk sat in the middle chair. His brows were like streaks of smeared paint, his face was as black as ink. He bulged with muscles. Beneath his chest a swarthy belly protruded. A young woman sat beside him. The Taoist set down the bamboo basket and seated himself also.

Lu walked up to them. Startled, the monk jumped to his fee. “Please have a seat, brother,” he cried. “Drink a cup with us.”

“What do you two mean by ruining the monastery?” Sagacious demanded, tightening his grasp on his staff.

“Please be seated, brother,” the monk replied. “Allow me to speak.”

“Let's hear it. Out with it,” Lu cut in, glaring.

“The monastery used to be a fine place. Its fields were broad, its monks were many. But those few old monks living in the cloisters like to eat and drink and carouse and spend money on women. The abbot couldn't restrain them. They complained against him and had him expelled. As a result, the monastery has fallen into decay, the monks have all left, the fields have been sold. I and this priest came here recently to take over. We hope to set the monastery in order and repair the halls.”

“Who is this woman?' asked Sagacious. “Why is she here drinking?”

“Please hear me, brother,” said the monk. “This woman is the daughter of Wang Youjin in the village below. He made contributions to the monastery often. But he's fallen on hard times and has had to sell all of their family property. His daughter has no other relatives, and her husband is ill. She's come here to borrow a little grain. Since her father used to be one of the monastery's donors, we've invited her to have some wine. That's all there is to it, brother. Don't listen to what those old animals say.”

Lu was impressed by the monk's polite speech. “Those old monks have been playing tricks on me,” he muttered. He returned to the kitchen, staff in hand. The monks had just finished their gruel and had been watching from a distance.

Sagacious pointed at them and said angrily: “So it was you who ruined the monastery. You lied to me!”

“Don't believe that monk, brother,” the old men responded in chorus. “He's keeping a woman there right now. He saw you had a knife and a staff. He

was unarmed, so he didn't dare quarrel. If you don't believe us, go back again and see how he treats you this time. Judge for yourself, brother. They're drinking wine and eating meat, while we hardly have any gruel. We were even worried that you wanted to eat it."

"That's true," said Lu. Holding his staff by the lower end, he went to the rear of the abbot's compound. The door in the corner of the wall was shut. Sagacious angrily broke it open with one kick and strode through. Cast Iron Buddha, or Accomplished Cui, halberd in hand, rushed forward to attack under the locust tree. With a roar, Lu sprang into the fray, brandishing his staff.

They fought fourteen or fifteen rounds. Cui, no match for Sagacious, could only parry and dodge. Weakening rapidly, he waited for a chance to run. The Taoist priest, seeing this, strode towards Lu with another halberd from the rear. Lu heard his approaching footsteps, but dared not turn his head. Then he saw the priest's shadow, and knew the man was almost upon him.

"Now," shouted Lu.

Cui, panic-stricken, thought this signalled a blow from the ex-major's staff. He leaped out of the combat circle. Sagacious whirled, so that he was facing both his foes in a triangle. He fought the pair for more than ten rounds. But he was hungry and travel-weary, and couldn't cope with their combined strength. He executed a feint and ran, dragging his staff. His adversaries, waving their halberds, chased him to the outside of the monastery. They fought another ten rounds, and Lu ran again. They pursued him as far as the stone bridge. There, they sat down on the balustrade and rested.

Sagacious continued a long way. When he had caught his breath, he said to himself: "I left my rucksack by the kitchen god. I thought only of escaping and forgot to take it. Now I have no money for the road and I'm hungry. This is a pretty fix. I can't go back because those two rascals are too much for me. It's two against one. I'd only be throwing my life away."

He dawdled along another few *li* until he came to a large forest. All the trees were red pine. "A wicked-looking wood," he thought.

Suddenly, he saw a man poke his head out of the shadows. The fellow peered at him, spat, then slipped back among the trees.

“That bird is a robber, or I miss my guess, and he's here waiting for business,” thought Lu. “When he saw I was a monk he knew there was no profit in me, so he spat and went away. It's just his bad luck that he's run into me. I've a bellyful of wrath and no place to get rid of it. I'll strip the lout of his clothes and sell them for wine money.”

Staff in hand, he hurried towards the forest, crying: “You rogue in the wood, come out, quick!”

When the man heard this, he laughed and said: “I'm down on my luck and in need of money and he comes to pick a quarrel.”

He grasped his halberd and bounded out from among the trees.

“Scabby donkey,” he shouted. “It's you who've come looking for death! I haven't sought you out.”

“I'll show you who I am,” said Lu. Brandishing his staff, he charged. The other fellow rushed forward with his halberd.

But even as he did so, he thought: “Where have I heard that voice before?”

“Your voice sounds familiar, monk,” he said. “What's your name?”

“I'll tell you after we've fought three hundred rounds,” Sagacious retorted.

Angered, the man attacked, halberd against staff. They fought a dozen or so rounds. “That monk's a grand warrior,” the man said to himself admiringly. After another five rounds he shouted: “Rest a bit. I've something to say!”

Both contestants jumped from the combat circle.

“Really, what is your name?” the man queried. “I'm sure I know your voice.” Sagacious told him. The man tossed aside his halberd and bowed. “Don't you recognize Shi Jin?” he asked.

“So it's you, Young Master Shi,” Sagacious laughed. The two exchanged salutes and went into the forest and sat down. “Where have you been since we parted in Weizhou?” asked the monk.

“The day after I left you at the tavern I heard that you had killed Butcher Zheng and run away. The police discovered I had helped you in sending off Old Jin and his daughter, the singer, so I decided I'd better leave Weizhou too. I went to Yanzhou, looking for my teacher Wang Jin, but I couldn't find him. I returned to the Northern Capital and lived there a while. But my money ran out, so I came to this place to pick up some more. I never thought we'd meet here. What made you become a monk, brother?”

Lu told his whole story from the beginning.

“If you're hungry, brother,” said Shi Jin, “I have dried meat and some buns.” He gave them to Sagacious. “You say you left your rucksack in the monastery,” Shi Jin continued. “Let's go back and get it. If they won't give it up, we'll finish the rascals off.”

“Right,” said Lu.

After he and Shi Jin had eaten their fill, they took their weapons and returned to Waguan Monastery. As they neared the entrance, they saw Accomplished Cui and Second Son Qiu sitting on the bridge.

“Come on, you wretches,” shouted Lu. “Let's fight to a finish!”

The fat monk laughed. “I've already licked you once. Haven't you had enough?”

Enraged, Sagacious ran towards the bridge, twirling his staff.

Cast Iron Buddha was annoyed. He charged down the bridge with his halberd.

Sagacious knew that he now had Shi Jin to back him up, and this gave him more courage. What's more, he had eaten heartily and was in high spirits. He fought the fat monk eight or nine rounds. Gradually, Accomplished Cui

weakened until he began looking for a means to escape. Qiu, the Taoist priest, saw that Cui was losing. He hurried forward with his halberd to assist.

Shi Jin bounded out of the forest and shouted: “Don't any of you try to get away!” He pushed back his broad-brimmed hat and attacked the priest, halberd in hand.

Both pairs battled furiously. The fight between Lu and Cui was reaching its climax. Lu saw an opening. “Ho,” he exclaimed. With one clout of his staff he knocked Cast Iron Buddha off the bridge.

The priest saw the monk fall and lost heart. He feinted with his weapon and ran.

“Where do you think you're going?' exclaimed Shi Jin. He caught up and plunged his halberd into the priest's back. The man fell to one side. Shi Jin placed a foot on him and stabbed again and again.

Lu sped down from the bridge. With a single blow of his staff he broke Cui's back.

Poor ruffians, their lives vanished like a dream.

Sagacious and Shi Jin tied the bodies of their victims together and threw them into a ravine. Then they re-entered the monastery and took Lu's rucksack from the kitchen. The old monks, having seen Lu routed and afraid Accomplished Cui and Second Son Qiu would kill them, had all hung themselves. When Sagacious and Shi Jin went through the door in the wall behind the abbot's hall, they found the kept woman had jumped into a well and committed suicide.

They searched eight or nine small buildings but found no one else.

On a bed they saw a few bundles of clothing. Shi Jin opened them. Hidden inside were gold and silver objects. They selected some and wrapped them up. In the kitchen they found fish and wine and meat. They lit the stove, cooked the food and dined.

Then each shouldered his pack. They tied reeds together into torches and ignited them in the stove. When the flames on the torches were leaping, they set fire to the small buildings in the rear. When these had burned almost to the door, they lit more torches and touched off the main hall from behind. Just then the wind rose, and crackling flames were soon spiralling into the sky.

Sagacious and Shi Jin watched for a while. The whole monastery was burning briskly. “It's very beautiful here,” they said to each other ironically, “but it's hardly a place to make our home!”

They set out and travelled all night. When the sky was turning light they saw a number of buildings in the distance, evidently a small town. Before long, they entered. They noticed a little tavern beside a single-plank bridge.

Lu and Shi Jin went inside and drank. They had the waiter buy them some fresh meat and rice, and they cooked these themselves. While dining they told each other of their experiences during their separate travels.

“Where will you go now?” Lu asked, when they had finished their meal.

“The only thing I can do is return to Mount Shaohua and join Zhu Wu and the other two leaders,” replied Shi Jin. “After some time there, I can decide what to do next.”

“Very well, brother,” said Lu. He took some gold and silver drinking vessels from his bag and gave them to Shi Jin.

The two then tied on their rucksacks, took up their weapons, paid the bill and left the tavern and the town. When they had walked six or seven *li* they came to a fork in the road.

“We part here, brother,” said Lu. “I'm going to the Eastern Capital. Don't see me off any further. You're going to Huazhou. You take that road. We'll meet again some day. If you know of anyone coming in my direction, you can have him bring me a message.”

Shi Jin bowed and bid Sagacious farewell. Each went his separate way.

We'll talk now of Sagacious Lu. After eight or nine days on the road he sighted the Eastern Capital. Lu entered the city. He found it a noisy, bustling place. In the center of town he apologetically asked a passer-by: “Could you tell me where the Great Xiangguo Monastery is?”

“There, ahead, by the bridge.”

Sagacious, carrying his staff, went on to the monastery. He looked it over, east and west, then proceeded to the guesthouse. A servant went in to announce him. Soon the reception monk came out. He was somewhat startled by Lu's fierce appearance, the iron staff in his hand, the sword at his waist and the pack upon his back.

“Where are you from, brother?” he asked.

“I'm form Mount Wutai,” said Sagacious. “I have a letter from my abbot, requesting Lucid Teacher, the venerable abbot of this monastery, to give me a position as a working monk.”

“In that case, please come with me.”

Sagacious followed him to the abbot's hall, opened his bundle and took out the letter.

“How is it you don't know the ceremony, brother?” the reception monk asked. “The abbot will be here in a minute. Remove your knife, bring out your robe and mat, and light the incense of faith so that you can do homage to the abbot.”

“Why didn't you say so before?” demanded Sagacious. He took off his knife, and pulled a stick of incense and a mat and his robe out of his rucksack. But he didn't know what to do with them. The reception monk placed Lu's robe over his shoulders and told him to put the mat on the floor.

A moment later the abbot, Lucid Teacher, appeared. The reception monk stepped forward and said: “This monk comes from Mount Wutai with a

letter to you from his abbot.”

“It's been a long time since my brother on Mount Wutai has written,” said Lucid Teacher.

“Quick, brother,” whispered the reception monk. “Pay your respects to our abbot.”

Lu didn't know where to put his stick of incense. The reception monk couldn't help laughing. He placed it in an incense burner. Sagacious kowtowed three times. The reception monk stopped him and presented his letter to the abbot.

Lucid Teacher opened the letter and read it. The letter set forth in detail why Sagacious had become a monk and the reason the had been sent down from Mount Wutai to the monastery in the Eastern Capital. “We pray you will exercise benevolence and give him a working post,” the missive concluded. “Please do not refuse. This monk will have great attainments later on.”

When he finished reading, the abbot said: “You've come a long way. Rest in the monk's quarters. They will give you something to eat.”

Sagacious thanked him. He collected his mat, bundle, staff and sword, and followed a novice out.

The abbot summoned both sections of his clergy. When they had all assembled in his hall he said: “My brother abbot on Mount Wutai really has no discretion. This monk he's sent used to be an officer in a border garrison. He shaved of his hair only because he killed a man. Twice he caused riots in the monks' quarters of the Wutai monastery. He made no end of trouble. My brother abbot couldn't cope with him, so he's shoved him off on me. Shall I reject him? My brother's plea is so insistent that I can't very well refuse. But if I keep him here, he's liable to play havoc with our rules and put us in a terrible state.”

“Even though he's one of our brothers,” said the reception monk, “he doesn't look at all like a man who's renounced the world. How can we keep him?”

“I've thought of something,” said the deacon. “Outside Sour Date Gate we have a vegetable garden behind the compound for retired working monks, don't we? The soldiers of the garrison and those twenty-old knaves living nearby are always despoiling it. They even graze sheep and horses there. It's quite a mess. The old monk in charge doesn't dare interfere. Why not let this fellow take over? At least he wouldn't be afraid of them.”

“That's good idea,” said the abbot. He instructed his assistant: “When that brother in the guest-room of the monks' hall has finished eating, bring him here.”

The assistant went out. He soon returned with Sagacious.

“My brother abbot has recommended that you join us,” said Lucid Teacher. “Our monastery has a large vegetable garden outside Sour Date Gate, next door to the Temple of the Sacred Mountain. I will put you in charge. Every day the men tending the garden must deliver to us ten loads of vegetables. The rest will belong to you.”

“I was sent by my abbot to become a member of the abbey here,” said Lu. “Even if you don't make me a supervisor or deacon, how can you put me in charge of a vegetable garden?”

“You don't understand, brother,” the elder interjected. “You've only just arrived. You haven't shown any special merit. How can you be appointed deacon? Overseeing the garden is also an important job.”

“I'm not looking after any vegetable garden,” cried Sagacious. “I won't be anything but a supervisor or deacon!”

“Let me explain,” said the reception monk. “We have various kinds of members. I, for instance, am the reception monk. My job is to receive guests and visiting monks. Posts like prior, personal assistant to the abbot, scribe and elder, are special jobs. They're not easy to get. The supervisor, deacon, director and manager are custodians of the monastery's property. You've just come. How can you be given such a high post? We also have jobs like master of the surras, master of the halls, master of the rooms,

master of alms begging, and master of the bath house. These positions are held by middle-ranking members.

“And then we have the keepers—keeper of the kitchen, of the tea, of the vegetable garden, of the toilets. These are all overseers' jobs, comparatively low in rank. If you keep the garden well for a year, brother, you'll be raised to keeper of the pagoda. If you do that well for a year, you'll be made master of the bath house. Only after still another year's good work might you be appointed supervisor.”

“So that's how it is,” said Lu. “As long as there's a chance for advancement, I'll start work tomorrow.”

Lucid Teacher let him remain for the day in the abbot's hall. A notice of appointment was written and posted in the compound for retired working monks, effective the following day.

The next morning Lucid Teacher sat on his dais and issued the formal appointment of Sagacious Lu to the post of keeper of the vegetable garden. Sagacious accepted the document, bid the abbot farewell, shouldered his pack, hung his knife at his waist, and took up his staff. With two monks as escorts, he went directly to the compound to assume his duties.

In the neighborhood of the monastery's vegetable fields were twenty or thirty rogues and gamblers. They made their living by selling the vegetables they stole from the monastery's fields. That day, when a few of them went to raid the fields, they saw a notice posted on the gate of the overseer's compound. It read:

The monastery has appointed the monk Sagacious Lu overseer of these vegetable fields. Starting tomorrow, he shall be in charge. Those having no business here are strictly forbidden to enter.

The rascals called a conference of the entire gang. “The monastery has sent a monk called Sagacious Lu to take charge of the vegetable fields,” they said. “He's new to the job. This is a good chance to pick a quarrel and beat him up. Teach the lout to respect us.”

“I have an idea,” one of them said. “He doesn't know us; how can we pick a quarrel? Let's lure him to the edge of the ordure pit instead, as if to congratulate him, then grab his legs and toss him in head over heels. It will be a nice little joke.”

“Good. Good,” approved the scoundrels. After making their plans, they went to seek the monk.

As to Sagacious Lu, on arriving at the overseer's compound, he put Ms pack and luggage in the house, leaned his staff against the wall and hung up his knife. The lay brothers who worked in the fields all came to greet him and he was handed the keys. The two monks who had escorted him there and the monk he was succeeding as overseer bid him farewell and returned to the monastery.

Sagacious then made a tour of the vegetable fields. He saw coming towards him twenty or thirty scamps bearing a platter of pastries and ceremonial wine.

“We neighbors have heard that you've been put in charge, master monk,” they said, grinning broadly, “and we've come to congratulate you.”

Not knowing it was a plot, Sagacious walked forward until he reached the edge of the ordure pit. The rascals advanced together, one of them intending to seize his left leg, another his right, and toss him in.

The result was: A foot kicked out and a fierce mountain tiger was startled; a fist struck out and a dragon of the sea met a sorry plight. A peaceful garden was instantly changed into a minor battlefield.

What came of the ruffians' scheme to upset Sagacious? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 7
The Tattooed Monk Uproots a Willow Tree
Lin Chong Enters White Tiger Inner Sanctum by Mistake

Among the twenty to thirty knaves who lived outside Sour Date Gate, two were leaders. One was Rat Crossing the Street Zhang the Third. The other was Snake in the Grass Li the Fourth. These two were in the lead as the gang advanced. Sagacious naturally walked forward to meet them.

The gang halted at the edge of the ordure pit and chorused: “We've come to congratulate you on your new post.”

“Since you're neighbors,” said Sagacious, “come into the compound and sit a while.”

Zhang and Li dropped to their knees respectfully. They hoped that the monk would approach to raise them courteously to their feet. Then they could go into action.

Noticing this, Sagacious grew suspicious. “This gang is a queer-looking lot, and they're not willing to come forward. Can they be planning to dump me?” he wondered. “The louts think they can pluck the tiger's whiskers. Well, I'll go to them, and show them how I use my hands and feet.”

Sagacious strode up to the gang. Still kneeling, Zhang and Li cried: “We younger brothers have come especially to pay our respects,” and each reached to grab one of the monk's legs.

But before they could even lay a finger on him, Sagacious lashed out with his right foot and kicked Li into the ordure pit. Zhang rose to flee, but a quick thrust of the monk's left leg and the two rascals were floundering in the foul mess together.

Startled, the rest of the gang gaped, then turned to run.

“Whoever moves goes into the pit,” bellowed Sagacious.

The scoundrels froze, not daring to take a step.

Zhang and Li now raised their heads out of the ordure. The pit seemed bottomless, and they were covered with excrement. Maggots clung to their hair. Standing in the filth they wailed: “Reverend, forgive us!”

“Help those two dogs out, you oafs,” Sagacious shouted to the gang, “and I'll forgive you all.”

The rogues quickly hauled their leaders from the pit and helped them over to a gourd arbour. The two stank to high heaven.

Sagacious roared with laughter. “Fools! Go and wash off in the pond. Then I want to talk to all of you.”

After the two gang leaders had cleansed themselves, some of their men removed their own clothing to give them a change of garments.

“Come into the compound,” Sagacious ordered. “We're going to have a talk.”

He sat down in the midst, pointed his finger at them and scoffed, “You ragamuffins! Did you think you could fool me? How could pricks like you ever hope to make sport of me?”

Zhang, Li and the whole gang dropped to their knees. “Our families have lived here for generations,” they said, “supporting themselves by gambling and begging and robbing these vegetable fields. The monastery paid people several times to drive us away, but no one could handle us. Where are you from, Reverend? Such a terrific fellow! We've never seen you at the monastery before. From now on, we'll be happy to serve you.”

“I'm from Yanan Prefecture, west of the Pass. I used to be a major, under his excellency the garrison commander Old General Zhong. But because I killed many men, I took refuge in a monastery and became a monk. Before coming here, I was on Mount Wutai. My family name is Lu. On entering the Buddhist order I was given the name Sagacious. Even if surrounded by

an army of thousands, I could hack my way out. What do you twenty or thirty amount to!”

The knaves loudly and respectfully voiced their agreement with these sentiments. They thanked the monk for his mercifulness and withdrew. Sagacious went into the house, put his things in order, then went to bed.

The next day, after talking the matter over, the rogues scraped some money together and bought ten bottles of wine. Leading a live pig, they called on Sagacious and invited him to join them in a feast. A table was laid in the overseer's compound. Sagacious sat at the head of the table, with the twenty to thirty rascals lining both sides. Everyone drank.

“Why are you spending so much money?” the monk asked.

“We're lucky,” they replied. “Now that you are here you can be our master.”

Sagacious was very pleased. Wine flowed freely and the party grew lively. There was singing and talking and applause and laughter. Just as the merriment was at its height, crows were heard cawing outside the gate.

Some of the men piously clacked their teeth and they intoned together: “Red lips rise to the sky, white tongue enters the earth.”

“What are you making such a blasted racket about?” demanded Sagacious.

The vagabonds replied: “When crows caw, it means there's going to be a quarrel.”

“Rot!” said the monk.

One of the lay brothers who tilled the monastery's fields laughed and said, “In the willow tree beside the wall there's a new crow's nest. The birds caw from dawn to dusk.”

“Let's get a ladder and destroy the nest,” said some.

“I'll do it,” volunteered several of the others.

Feeling his wine, Sagacious went out with the crowd to take a look. Sure enough, there was a crow's nest in the willow tree.

“Get a ladder and tear the nest down,” said the men. “Then our ears can have a little peace and quiet.”

“I'll climb up and do the job,” boasted Li, “and I don't need any ladder.”

Sagacious looked the situation over, walked up to the tree and removed his cassock. He bent and grasped the lower part of the trunk with his right hand, while his left hand seized it higher up, then gave a tremendous wrench—and pulled the tree from the ground, roots and all!

The knaves dropped to their knees, crying: “The master is no ordinary mortal! He's truly one of the *Lohans!* If he didn't have ten million catties of strength, how could he have uprooted that tree?”

“It was nothing at all,” Lu said. “One of these days I'll show you how to handle weapons.”

That night the vagabonds departed. But they came again the next day, and every day thereafter, bringing meat and wine to feast Sagacious, for they positively worshipped him. They begged the monk to demonstrate his skill with weapons.

After several days of this, Sagacious thought to himself: “These fellows have been treating me day after day. I ought to give them a banquet in return.” He sent a few lay brothers into the city to buy several platters of fruit and five or six buckets of wine, and he killed a pig and slaughtered a sheep. It was then the end of the third lunar month.

“The weather's getting warm,” said Sagacious. He had mats spread beneath the green ash tree and invited the rascals to sit around and feast outdoors.

Wine was served in large bowls and meat in big chunks. When everyone had eaten his fill, the fruit was brought out and more wine. Soon the feasters were thoroughly sated.

“The past few days you've demonstrated your strength, master,” said the rogues, “but you still haven't shown us your skill with weapons. It would be fine it you could give us a performance.”

“All right,” said Sagacious. He went into the house and brought out his solid iron Buddhist staff, five feet long from end to end and weighing sixty-two catties.

His audience was amazed. “Only a man with the strength of a water buffalo in his arms could handle such a weapon,” they cried.

Sagacious took up the staff and flourished it effortlessly, making it whistle through the air. The vagabonds cheered and applauded.

Just as the monk was warming up, a gentleman appeared at a gap in the compound wall. “Truly remarkable,” he commended. Sagacious stopped his exercise and turned to see who had spoken.

The gentleman wore a black muslin cap with its two corners gathered together; a pair of interlinked circlets of white jade held the knot of hair at the back of his head. He was dressed in a green officer's robe of flowered silk, bound at the waist by a girdle made of double strips of beaver and fastened by a silver clasp shaped like a tortoise back. His feet were shod in square-toed black boots. In his hand he carried a folding Chengdu fan. About thirty-five years old, he had a head like a panther, round eyes, a chin sharp as a swallow's beak, whiskers like a tiger and was very tall.

“Indeed remarkable,” he said. “What excellent skill.”

“If he approves, it certainly must be good,” said the vagabonds.

“Who is that officer?” queried Sagacious.

“An arms instructor of the Mighty Imperial Guards. His name is Lin Chong.”

“Invite him in. I'd like to meet him.”

Hearing this, the arms instructor leaped in through the gap in the wall. The two men greeted each other and sat down beneath the ash tree.

“Where are you from, brother monk?” asked Lin. “What is your name?”

“I'm Lu Da, from west of the Pass. Because I killed many men, I had to become a monk. In my youth, I spent some time in the Eastern Capital. I know your honorable father, Major Lin.”

Lin Chong was very pleased, and adopted Sagacious as his sworn brother on the spot.

“What brings you here today, Arms Instructor?” asked Sagacious.

“My wife and I just arrived at the Temple of the Sacred Mountain next door to burn incense. Hearing the cheers of your audience, I looked over and was intrigued by your performance. I told my wife and her maidservant, Jin Er, to burn the incense without me, that I would wait for them by the gap in the wall. I didn't think I would actually have the honor to meet you, brother.”

“When I first came here I didn't know anybody,” said Sagacious. “Then I became acquainted with these brothers and we gather together every day. Today, you have thought well enough of me to make me your sworn brother. That makes me very happy.” He ordered the lay brothers to bring more wine.

Just as they were finishing their third round, the maidservant Jin Er, agitated and red in the face, rushed up to the gap in the wall and cried: “Hurry, master! Our lady is having trouble with a man in the temple!”

“Where?” Lin Chong demanded hastily.

“As we were coming down the stairs of the Five Peaks Pavilion, a low fellow suddenly blocked her way. He won't let her pass.”

Lin Chong quickly took his leave of Sagacious. “I'll see you again, brother. Forgive me!” He leaped through the gap in the wall and raced with Jin Er back to the temple.

When he reached the Five Peaks Pavilion he saw several idlers carrying crossbows, blowpipes and limed sticks gathered below the stair railing. They were watching a young man who was standing on the stairway with his back to them, blocking the path of Lin Chong's wife.

“Let's go upstairs,” the young man was urging her. “I want to talk to you.”

Blushing, the lady said, “What right do you have to make sport of a respectable woman in times of peace and order!”

Lin pushed forward, seized the young man by the shoulder and spun him around. “I'll teach you to insult a good man's wife,” he shouted, raising his fist. Then he recognized Young Master Gao, adopted son of Marshal Gao Qiu, commander of the Imperial Guards.

When Gao Qiu first rose to high office he had no son to help him run his numerous affairs. And so he adopted the son of his uncle, Gao the Third. Since the boy was not only his cousin but now also his foster son, Marshal Gao loved him to excess.

The young scoundrel made full use of his foster father's influence in the Eastern Capital. His favorite pastime was despoiling other men's wives. Fearful of his powerful connections, none of the husbands dared speak out against him. He became known as the “King of Lechers.”

When Liu Chong saw that he was Young Master Gao, the strength left his arms.

“This has nothing to do with you, Lin Chong,” said Gao. “Who asked you to interfere!” He didn't realize that the lady was Lin Chong's wife. Had he known, the thing would never have happened. Seeing Lin Chong's hesitancy, he spoke boldly.

The commotion drew a crowd of idlers. “Don't be angry, Arms Instructor,” one said. “The young master didn't recognize her. It was all a mistake.”

Lin Chong's rage hadn't fully abated, and he glared at the rake with burning eyes. Some of the crowd soothed Lin Chong while others persuaded Gao to

leave the temple grounds, get on his horse and depart.

Lin Chong was turning to go with his wife and Jin Er, the maidservant, when Sagacious, iron staff in hand, came charging into the temple compound with huge strides, leading his twenty to thirty vagabonds.

“Where are you going, brother?” asked Lin Chong.

“I've come to help you fight,” said Sagacious.

“The man turned out to be the son of our Marshal Gao. He hadn't recognized my wife and behaved discourteously. I was going to give the lout a good drubbing, but then I thought it would make the marshal lose too much face,” Lin Chong explained. “You know the old saying, 'Fear not officials—except those who officiate over you!' After all, I'm on his payroll. I decided to let the young rascal off this time.”

“You many be afraid of the marshal, but he doesn't scare me a bit,” shouted Sagacious. “If I ever run into that young whelp of his I'll give him three hundred licks of my iron staff.”

Lin Chong saw that Sagacious was drunk and he said: “You're quite right, of course, brother. It was only because everybody urged me that I let him go.”

“The next time you have any trouble, just call me and I'll take care of it!”

The knaves supported the tipsy Sagacious under the arms. “Let's go back, Reverend,” they said. “You can deal with young Gao later.”

Iron staff in hand, Sagacious said politely to Lin Chong's lady: “Your pardon, sister-in-law. Please don't laugh at me.” And to Lin Chong he said: “Until tomorrow, brother.” Then he and the vagabonds departed.

Lin Chong, his wife and Jin Er returned home. The arms instructor was angry and depressed.

As for Young Master Gao, when he had drifted into the temple leading his band of idle cronies and met Lin Chong's wife, he had become sorely

enamored. After Lin Chong drove him off, he returned unhappily to the marshal's residence.

A few days later, his ne'er-do-well friends called. But they found him so fretful and irritable that they went away.

One of these idlers was an attendant named Fu An, better known as Dried Pecker Head. He suspected what was troubling Young Master Gao," and later went alone to the residence. The young rake was sitting abstracted in the study.

Fu An drew near and said: "You've been rather pale lately, Young Master. You seldom smile. Something must be bothering you."

"How do you know?"

"I'm just guessing."

"Can you guess what it is?"

"Lin Chong's wife. How's that for a guess?"

The Young Master laughed. "Not bad. The problem is I don't know how to get her."

"Nothing to it. You're afraid to provoke Lin Chong because he's a big powerful fellow. But you needn't worry. He's under the marshal's command and is being well provided for. Would he dare to offend? The least that could happen to him is exile, the worst is death. Now I've got a little scheme that will put his wife right into you hands."

"I've met many beautiful women. Why should I love only her? My heart is bewitched, I'm not happy. If you have a scheme that will work, I'll reward you generously."

"One of your trusted men, Captain Lu Qian, is Lin Chong's best friend. Tomorrow, prepare a feast in a quiet nook upstairs in Lu Qian's house. Have Lu invite Lin out for some drinking. Let Lu take him to a secluded room on the upper floor of the Fan Pavilion Tavern. I'll go to Lin's wife and say:

'Your husband has been drinking in Lu Qian's house and has been stricken by a sudden illness. He's collapsed. You'd better hurry and look after him.' Then I'll bring her over to Lu's place, where you'll be waiting. Women are as changeable as water. When she sees what a handsome romantic sort you are, Young Master, and you deluge her with sweet words, she won't be able to resist. What do you think of my plan?"

"Excellent," Gao applauded. "Have Captain Lu Qian summoned here tonight."

It so happened that Lu Qian lived only one street away from the Gao residence. He agreed to the scheme immediately. He felt he had no alternative. As long as it would please the Young Master, he was willing to forget his friendship with the arms instructor.

To get back to Lin Chong. For several days he had been brooding at home. One morning he heard someone shouting at his front door: "Is the arms instructor in?"

Lin Chong went to the door, and there was Lu Qian.

"What brings you here, Brother Lu?" Lin asked quickly.

"I'm concerned about you. Why haven't I seen you on the streets these past few days, brother?"

"My mind is troubled. I don't feel like going out."

"Come and have a few cups with me and forget about your trouble."

"First sit a while and have some tea."

After the two finished their tea, they rose.

"Sister-in-law," Lu Qian called to Lin Chong's wife who was in the next room, "I'm taking Brother Lin over to my place for a few cups of wine."

The lady hurried to the door curtain and pushed it aside. "Don't let him drink too much, brother," she admonished. "Send him home early."

The two men strolled down the street. “Let's not go to my house, brother,” Lu Qian said. “We can have our drinks in the Fan Pavilion.”

They went to the tavern. They selected a small room and ordered two bottles of good wine and some tidbits to go with it. For a time they chatted idly. Lin Chong sighed.

“What's wrong, brother?” asked Lu Qian.

“You don't know what's happened. I have talents but no intelligent superior to recognize them. I serve under little men from whom I have to take a lot of dirty nonsense.”

“There are several arms instructors in the Imperial Guards, but none can compare with you. The marshal regards you very highly. Who would dare to molest you?”

Lin Chong told Lu Qian about his encounter with Young Master Gao a few days before.

“The Young Master didn't realize she was your wife,” Lu Qian said soothingly. “It's not serious. Forget it. Let's drink.”

Lin Chong downed eight or nine cups. Soon he had to relieve himself. He got up and said, “I have to wash my hands.” He went down the stairs, left the tavern, and attended to his business in a small lane to the east. As he was coming out, he met Jin Er.

“I've been looking all over for you, master,” said the maidservant. “So you're here!”

“What's up?” asked Lin Chong hastily.

“You had only been gone a little while when a man come rushing over to our house and said to the mistress, 'I'm a neighbor of Captain Lu. While drinking with him, me arms instructor suddenly gasped for breath and fell to the floor. You'd better go and look after him.' Our lady begged Dame Wang next door to take care of our house, then she and I hurried with the

man to a place one street past the marshal's residence. When we got upstairs we saw a table laden with food and drink, but mere was no sign of you, master.

“As we turned to leave, that young fellow who pestered the mistress at the temple the other day came out and leered: 'Stay a while, lady. Your true husband is here!' I flew down the stairs. Our mistress was screaming for help. I couldn't find you anywhere. Finally I met Doctor Zhang, the medicine vendor, and he told me: 'I just saw the arms instructor and another man going into the tavern.' so I hurried over here. Master, go quickly!”

Shocked, Lin Chong without waiting for Jin Er, ran at triple speed to Lu Qian's house and raced up the stairs. The door was locked. He could hear his lady exclaiming: “In times of peace and order how dare you hold a good man's wife prisoner!” Young Master Gao was entreating: “Have pity on me, mistress. Even a woman of iron and stone shouldn't be so cold-hearted!”

“Wife, open the door,” thundered Lin Chong.

Hearing her husband's voice, Mistress Lin rushed to comply. The terrified Young Master Gao pushed open a window, climbed out and fled along the top of a wall. He was gone before Lin Chong entered the room.

“Did that dog violate you?” demanded the arms instructor.

“No,” replied his wife.

In a fury, Lin Chong smashed Lu Qian's furniture to bits, then led his wife down the stairs. As they came out of the house, frightened neighbors on both sides of the street hastily shut their doors tight. Jin Er was waiting for them outside. The three of them went home together.

Lin Chong armed himself with a sharp knife and sped directly to the tavern in search of Lu Qian. But his treacherous friend was gone. Lin Chong went to Lu Qian's house and waited outside the door all night. But Lu Qian did not return. Finally the arms instructor went home.

“He didn't harm me. Don't do anything foolish,” his wife urged.

“Who would have thought that Lu Qian is such a scoundrel,” fumed Lin Chong. “Calling me 'brother' while plotting against me all the time. Even if I can't catch that Young Master I won't let Lu Qian off!'”

His wife pleaded desperately with him to remain at home.

Meanwhile, Lu Qian hid in the marshal's residence, afraid to return to his own house. For three successive days, the arms instructor waited for him outside the residence gate, but the traitor didn't dare show himself. Lin Chong's appearance was so menacing, no one had the courage to question him.

On the fourth day since they parted, Sagacious came to Lin Chong's home. “Where have you been keeping yourself these past few days, Arms Instructor?” the monk asked.

“I've been too busy to call on you, brother,” replied Lin Chong apologetically. “Since you've honored me with a visit to my humble home, I ought to offer you a few cups of wine. But we don't have anything decent to drink in the house. Why not go out for a stroll together and have a cup or two in the market place?”

“Excellent,” said Sagacious.

They went out and drank together all day and arranged to meet again on the morrow. Thereafter, Lin drank with Sagacious every day. In time, he gradually set the other matter aside.

As to Young Master Gao, after he received that fright in Lu Qian's house and had to flee over the wall, he became ill and took to his bed. He didn't dare say anything to the marshal about what had happened. Lu Qian and Fu An called on the Young Master at the residence. They found him pale and in low spirits.

“Why are you so unhappy, Young Master?” asked Lu Qian.

“I won't try to fool you two,” Gao replied. “Now that I've failed in both attempts to get Lin's wife, and had that awful scare in addition, I feel worse

than ever. If I pass out of this world in three months or half a year, you needn't be surprised."

"Be of good cheer," the sycophants urged. "Unless she suddenly hangs herself, we guarantee to get you that woman, come what may." At that moment the old chamberlain entered to see how the Young Master was faring. Lu Qian and Fu An withdrew and held a private consultation.

"There's only one way..." they agreed. After the chamberlain had concluded his call and emerged, they invited him to a quiet corner.

"There's only one way the Young Master can get well," they said. "We must let the marshal know and have him order the death of Lin Chong. Then the Young Master will be able to get Lin's wife and he'll recover. Otherwise, he's sure to die."

"That's easy," replied the old chamberlain. "I'll inform the marshal this evening."

"We already have a plan," said the two. "We only await word from you."

That night, the old chamberlain saw the marshal. "I've discovered what's wrong with the Young Master," he said. "It's Lin Chong's wife."

"When did he ever see the woman?" asked Gao Qiu.

"On the twenty-eighth of last month, at the Temple of the Sacred Mountain. Today is a little over a month," said the old chamberlain, and he told the marshal what Lu Qian had in mind.

"H'mm, Lin Chong's wife, eh? The question is how to put Lin Chong out of me way," mused the marshal. "Let me think. I can't let my son lose his life just for the sake of Lin Chong."

"Lu Qian and Fu an have a plan."

"So? Bring them in here and we'll talk it over." The old chamberlain summoned Lu Qian and Fu An into the marshal's hall. They hailed Gao respectfully.

“Do you two have a plan that can cure my son's ailment? If so, I'll raise you both in rank.”

Lu Qian stepped forward. “Gracious lord, it can be done only thus and thus and thus....”

“Very well,” said the marshal. “You may take action tomorrow.” Of this we need say no more.

To get back to Lin Chong. He drank every day with Sagacious Lu and finally forgot about the matter.

One day, as the two friends were nearing a lane, they saw a big fellow standing on a corner, a cap with gathered ends on his bead and dressed in an old military robe. He was holding a fine sword in his hand, with a tuft of grass tied to it indicating that it was for sale.

“No one recognizes its value,” he was muttering. “What a pity for my precious sword!”

Lin Chong paid no attention and continued walking and chatting with Sagacious. The man trailed behind them, saying: “A splendid sword. It's shame no one appreciates it!”

Lin Chong and Sagacious were still engrossed in their conversation. The man followed them.

“A big city like the Eastern Capital and not a single person knows the worth of military weapons,” he cried.

At this, Lin Chong looked around. The fellow whipped the sword out of its sheath. It gleamed dazzlingly in the sun.

Lin Chong was fated for trouble. He said abruptly: “Let me see it.”

The fellow handed him the sword. Lin Chong took the weapon and he and Sagacious examined it.

Astonished, the arms instructor exclaimed: “An excellent blade! How much do you want for it?”

“The price is three thousand strings of cash, but I'll take two.”

“It's well worth two thousand, but you won't find anyone who'll give that much. If you're willing to accept one thousand, I'll buy it from you.”

“I need money quickly. If you really want the sword I'll knock off five hundred and let you have it for fifteen hundred.”

“A thousand is the best I can do.”

The fellow sighed. “It's selling gold at the price of iron. All right, all right, but not one copper less.”

“Come home with me and I'll give you the money,” said Lin Chong. He turned to Sagacious, “Wait for me in the teahouse, brother. I'll join you soon.”

“No,” said the monk, “I must go back. I'll see you tomorrow.”

After taking leave of Sagacious, Lin Chong brought the sword-seller to his home, counted out the purchase price in silver and gave it to him.

“Where did you get this blade?” the arms instructor asked.

“It was handed down to me from my ancestors. Because my family became impoverished I had no choice. I had to sell it.”

“What's the name of your family?”

“If I were to tell you, I'd die of shame.”

Lin Chong asked no more. The fellow took the money and departed.

Lin Chong turned the sword this way and that. “Truly a beautiful weapon. Marshal Gao is supposed to have a fine sword but he won't show it to anyone. Though I've asked to see it several times, he's never been willing to

bring it out. Today I've bought a fine sword too. One of these days I'll compare blades with him."

The arms instructor didn't let the sword out of his hand all evening. Late that night he finally hung it on the wall, but he was up before daybreak and took the blade down again to admire it.

Some time before noon two lieutenants came to his gate and cried: "Arms Instructor Lin, an order from the marshal. He's heard that you've bought a fine sword and wants you to bring it to compare with his. The marshal is waiting for you in the residence."

"Who is the big-mouthed gossip that reported the news so fast?" wondered Lin Chong.

The lieutenants waited while Lin Chong got dressed. He took his sword and accompanied them.

On the way he said: "I haven't seen you at the residence before."

"We've only recently been transferred," they replied.

Soon they arrived at the residence. In the reception room, Lin Chong halted.

"The marshal is waiting in the rear hall," said the lieutenants.

Lin Chong went with them around a screen wall into the rear hall. But there was still no sign of the marshal, and Lin Chong halted once more.

"The marshal is awaiting the arms instructor in the rearmost court. He directed us to bring you there," said the lieutenants.

Lin followed them through two or three more gateways until they came to a courtyard lined on all sides by green railings.

The lieutenants led him to the entrance of a large hall and said: "Please wait out here, Arms Instructor, while we report to the marshal. We won't be long."

Lin Chong stood before the eaves of a porch while the two lieutenants went inside. A time long enough to drink a cup of tea passed, but they did not return. Growing suspicious, the arms instructor pushed aside a hanging awning, poked his head in and looked. There, above the door, was a placard with four words written in green: “White Tiger Inner Sanctum.”

“This is where the highest military affairs are discussed,” thought Lin Chong, startled. “How dare I go in there!”

He turned hastily. Behind him he heard the tread of boots, the steps ringing sharply. Another man had entered the courtyard. The arms instructor recognized him. It was none other than Marshal Gao. Lin Chong proffered his sword with both hands, and greeted him respectfully.

“Lin Chong,” the marshal barked. “I didn't summon you. How dare you force your way into the White Tiger Inner Sanctum! Don't you know the law? And carrying a weapon! You must have come to kill me! People told me that you were seen waiting outside the Residence two or three day ago with a knife in your hand. Your intentions are surely evil!”

Bowing, Lin Chong replied, “Benevolent lord, two of your lieutenants brought me here saying you wanted to compare your sword with mine.”

“Where are they?” cried the marshal.

“They just went into the hall, sir.”

“Lies! Lies! No lieutenants would dare enter my official halls. Ho, guards! Seize this lout!”

Before the order had left the marshal's mouth, from the buildings flanking the sides of the courtyard over thirty stalwarts came rushing out and knocked Lin Chong to the ground.

“As an arms instructor of the Imperial Guards, you must know the law,” the marshal raged. “Why also would you enter the Inner Sanctum with a sharp sword in your hand if not to murder me?”

He ordered his men to take Lin Chong away. Could Lin Chong survive?

And because of this there was a great tumult on the Central Plains and a wild disturbance on the waters. Peasants had to wear army designations on their backs. Military pennants fluttered on fishing boats.

Did Lin Chong live or die? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 8
Arms Instructor Lin Is Tattooed and Exiled to Cangzhou
Sagacious Lu Makes a Shambles of Wild Boar Forest

As we were saying, Marshal Gao shouted for his guards to take Lin Chong out and execute him. Lin Chong loudly exclaimed that he was innocent.

“Why did you enter the Inner Sanctum with a sword in your hand?” demanded the marshal. “Of course you wanted to kill me!”

“Would I dare go in if the marshal hadn't summoned me?” countered Lin Chong. “I saw those two lieutenants enter the hall! They tricked me into coming here!”

“Nonsense! What lieutenants are you talking about? This scoundrel refuses to admit his guilt,” said the marshal. And he directed his guards: “Take him to Kaifeng Prefecture. Ask Prefect Teng to examine him and investigate the case. Get the truth out of him, then have him executed. Label the sword as an official exhibit and take it along.”

Bearing the marshal's order, the guards escorted Lin Chong to Kaifeng Prefecture. It happened that the prefect was still holding court, and Marshal Gao's emissary brought Lin Chong to the prefect's hall and knelt at the foot of the dais. The prefect's secretary relayed the emissary's message from Gao Qiu and placed the labelled sword down in front of Lin Chong.

“Lin Chong,” said the prefect, “you're an arms instructor in the Imperial Guards. You must know the law. How could you enter the Inner Sanctum holding a sword? That's an offence punishable by death.”

“Benevolent lord, you reflect the truth like a mirror. Lin Chong has been grievously wronged! Although I'm only a crude and stupid military man, I'm not exactly ignorant of the law. How would I presume to enter the Inner Sanctum? The reason I went there was this: On the twenty-eighth of last month I took my wife to the Temple of the Sacred Mountain to burn incense. There I caught Marshal Gao's son trying to seduce her. I berated him and drove him away. Next, he had Captain Lu Qian trick me into going out to drink and got Fu An to lure my wife to Captain Lu's home, where he tried to ravish her. This too I discovered and wrecked Lu Qian's furniture. Though Young Master Gao failed to despoil her, I have witnesses to both attempts.

“Yesterday, I bought this sword. Today, Marshal Gao sent two lieutenants to summon me. They said he wanted me to bring my sword to compare it with his. And so I went with them to the Inner Sanctum. After they went inside, Marshal Gao suddenly entered the courtyard. It's all a plot to destroy me. Please help me, Your Honor!”

After hearing Lin Chong's story, the prefect ordered that a receipt-of-prisoner be issued, a wooden rack locked around the arms instructor's neck, and that he be held in custody. Lin Chong's family sent food to him in jail and gave tips to the keepers. His father-in-law, Arms Instructor Zhang, also called at the prison. He spent quite a bit, bribing high and low.

It happened that in the prefecture there was a scribe named Sun Ding. Because he was extremely just and kindly and always willing to help people, he was known as Sun the Buddha. Learning the facts of the case, he diplomatically informed the prefect what he had discovered.

“Lin Chong has been wronged,” he said. “You must help him.”

“But Marshal Gao has confirmed that he committed a crime. He insists that I convict Lin Chong for entering the Inner Sanctum, sword in hand, with the intention of murdering him. What can I do?”

“Is Kaifeng Prefecture ruled by the imperial court or the family of Marshal Gao?”

“Don't talk nonsense!”

“Everyone knows Gao Qiu uses his position tyrannically. There's nothing he won't do. Whoever offends him, even in the slightest, he sends to Kaifeng Prefecture. If he wants a man killed, we kill him. If he wants him hacked, we hack him. We've become a mere subdivision of his family.”

“How can I make things easy for Lin Chong? What sort of sentence should I pass?”

“From Lin Chong's story, it's plain that he's innocent, although we haven't been able to find those two lieutenants. Why not have him confess to entering the Inner Sanctum improperly wearing a sword at his waist, sentence him to twenty strokes of the bamboo, tattoo him and exile him to some distant military district?”

After considering this, Prefect Teng went to see Marshal Gao and urged him to agree to such a confession from Lin Chong. Knowing that reason was against him, and since the prefect seemed reluctant to cooperate, the marshal was forced to consent.

The very same day, the prefect called court into session. He had Lin Chong summoned, the rack removed and twenty blows of the bamboo administered. The prefect directed the tattooer to place the mark of a criminal on Lin Chong's cheek. Then he calculated the distance and decided upon Cangzhou as Lin's place of exile. In full court, a hinged wooden rack of seven and a half catties was placed around the arms instructor's neck and nailed fast, and prefectural seals were affixed. The prefect issued a deportation order and designated two guards to escort the prisoner to his destination. Their names were Dong Chao and Xue Ba.

The guards left the prefectural compound with Lin Chong. Outside the gate, many of Lin Chong's neighbors and his father-in-law, Arms Instructor Zhang, were waiting. All repaired to a tavern and took seats.

“Thanks to the assistance of Scribe Sun, my beating was not heavy and I'm still able to walk,” said Lin Chong.

Arms Instructor Zhang told the waiter to serve the two guards with wine and fruit. They drank several cups, and the old man presented them each with some silver.

Clasping hands respectfully, Lin Chong addressed his father-in-law. “Bad times have befallen me, exalted father-in-law. I clashed with Young Master Gao and the court has condemned me wrongfully. Now I have something to say: In the three years since you generously gave me your daughter in marriage she has never done anything to displease me. Although she's borne no children, not once have we quarrelled or even grown red in the face. Today I've suffered this misfortune. I'm being exiled to Cangzhou and there's no telling whether I'll live or die. My lady will be left at home. I'm worried about her. I'm afraid Young Master Gao will try to force his suit.

“She's still young. I shouldn't tie her down. This is my own idea, it's entirely voluntary. In the presence of our honorable neighbors I want to write out an annulment of our marriage, consenting to her making a new match and promising not to contest it. Only in this way will I feel at ease, assured that Young Master Gao won't be able to harm her.”

“What words are these, good son-in-law,” cried the old arms instructor. “You've been unlucky and this misfortune has happened. It's not of your own doing. Today you're going to Cangzhou for temporary refuge, but sooner or later Heaven will pity you and let you return, and husband and wife will be together again. I've got a bit of money. I'll have my daughter and Jin Er move in with me. Come what may, I can support them for four or five years. I won't allow my daughter out on the streets. Young Master Gao won't be able to see her even if he wants to. Don't worry. I'll take care of everything. You go on to Cangzhou. From time to time I'll send you letters and clothing. Don't get any foolish ideas. Just go in peace.”

“Thank you, father-in-law, for your good intentions. But I wouldn't feel right, tying her down. Have pity, father-in-law, let me have my way. Then, even if I die, I can close my eyes peacefully.”

But Arms Instructor Zhang wouldn't hear of it. The neighbors also were opposed.

“Unless I am allowed to do this, even if I succeed in coming back I swear I'll never see her again,” said Lin Chong.

“Write out the annulment, if that's how you feel,” said the old man. “In any event, I won't let my daughter marry another.”

Lin Chong then sent for a scribe and purchased a sheet of paper. The scribe wrote as Lin Chong dictated:

Because he was convicted of a serious crime, Lin Chong, arms instructor of the Imperial Guards, Eastern Capital, has been sentenced to exile in Cangzhou. What will happen to him is difficult to foretell. His wife (maiden name Zhang) is still young, and he therefore wishes to annul their marriage. He grants her permission to contract a new marriage and guarantees that he will never contest it. The annulment is truly voluntary and not issued under compulsion. In the event of any doubt, this document shall serve as proof.

Year... Month... Day...

When the document was completed, Lin Chong took the writing brush and signed his name below the date, then added his thumb print. Just as he was about to hand the annulment to his father-in-law, his wife, weeping and crying aloud, came hurrying to the tavern, followed by the maidservant, Jin Er, who was carrying a bundle of clothing. Lin Chong rose and went forward to meet her.

“Wife,” he said, “I have something to tell you. I've already spoken to father-in-law. Because I've fallen on bad times, I've had this misfortune. Today, I start for Cangzhou. It's hard to say whether I'll live or die. I don't want to hold you back in the flower of your youth, so I've had this document written. Please don't wait for me. If you meet a good man, marry again. Don't delay your happiness on my account.”

“Husband,” she wept. “I've never wronged you in the slightest. How can you discard me?”

“I mean well, wife,” said Lin Chong. “Otherwise, we'll only impede each other. You'll be harmed.”

“Don't worry, my daughter,” said Arms Instructor Zhang. “Even though son-in-law recommends it, I'll never allow you to remarry. He can depart easy in his mind. If he doesn't return, I'll provide for you for the rest of your life, so that you can remain faithful to him.”

The young woman uttered heart-rending sobs, tears streaming down her cheeks. When she saw the annulment document she collapsed swooning to the floor. Lin Chong and his father-in-law hurried to raise her. It was some time before she revived. She wept uncontrollably as Lin Chong presented the document to her father. Women neighbors did their best to comfort her. Supporting the bereft woman under the arms, they escorted her home.

“Go, and try to come back soon,” Arms Instructor Zhang told Lin Chong. “Tomorrow, I shall move your wife over to my house. I'll take care of her until you return. You can depart without any worries. Be sure to write to us from time to time, if you find people who can deliver your letters.”

Lin Chong rose and thanked his father-in-law and his neighbors, placed his bundle on his back, and went off with the guards. Arms Instructor Zhang and the neighbors departed for home. Of them we shall say no more.

We'll speak of the two guards and Lin Chong. Dong Chao and Xue Ba locked their prisoner in a guard house, and returned to their homes to pack some things for their journey. As Dong Chao was tying a bundle together, a waiter from the tavern at the head of the lane came in.

“Sir, a gentleman wishes to speak with you in our tavern.”

“Who is he?”

“I don't know. He only told me to invite you over.”

Dong Chao went with the waiter to a room in the tavern. He found a man wearing a hat decorated with Buddhist swastikas and dressed in a black silk

tunic. On his feet were black boots and plain stockings. When Dong Chao entered, the man quickly rose and clasped hands in greeting.

“Please be seated,” he said.

“I have not had the privilege of meeting Your Honor before,” said Dong Chao. “How can I serve you?”

“Please sit down. You'll know shortly.”

Dong Chao took a chair on the opposite side of the table. The waiter brought wine cups and food and fruit and laid them out.

“Where does Xue the guard live?” the man asked.

“In that lane ahead,” replied Dong Chao.

The man called the waiter and asked him for Xue's exact address. “Invite him here to meet me,” he instructed.

In less time than it takes to drink a cup of tea, the waiter returned with Xue Ba.

“This gentleman has invited us for a talk,” Dong Chao explained.

“May I ask your name, sir?” queried Xue Ba.

“You'll know very soon,” replied the man. “First let us drink.”

The three took their seats and the waiter served wine. After they had consumed several cups, the man drew from his sleeve ten ounces of gold and placed them on the table.

“Five ounces for each of you,” he said. “There is a small matter I want to trouble you about.”

“But we don't know Your Honor. Why should you give us gold?” they asked.

“Aren't you going to Cangzhou?”

“We're taking Lin Chong there under orders of the Kaifeng Prefect,” said Dong Chao.

“It's precisely for that reason that I must bother you two. I am Marshal Gao's trusted Captain Lu Qian.”

Dong Chao and Xue Ba immediately greeted him with profound respect. “How can insignificant men like us presume to sit at the same table with Your Honor,” they cried.

“As you know, Lin Chong has incurred the marshal's displeasure. The marshal has ordered me to present you with these ten ounces of gold. He hopes you will finish off Lin Chong in some secluded place along the road—it needn't be too far—and bring back a certification of his death from the local authorities. If Kaifeng Prefecture causes any difficulty, the marshal will take care of it personally. You needn't worry about that.”

“I'm afraid it's not possible,” said Dong Chao. “The official order of Kaifeng Prefecture directs that we deliver Lin Chong alive, not that we kill him. He's not an old man: How could we explain his death? We'd surely get into trouble. I'm afraid it can't be done.”

“Dong, old fellow,” said Xue Ba, “listen to me. If Marshal Gao ordered us to die, we would have to obey, to say nothing of a case like this, when he sends this gentleman with gold. Say no more. I'll share it with you and that's that. If we do this little favor, we'll be looked after in the future. On the road to Cangzhou there's a big pine forest, a wild evil place. Come what may, we'll finish him off there.”

Xue Ba took the gold and said, “You can rely on us, Your Honor. At the latest on the fifth stage of the journey, at the earliest the second, the thing will be done.”

Very pleased, Lu Qian exclaimed: “Xue Ba is truly straightforward and to the point. When the deed is accomplished, bring back the golden print on

Lin Chong's face as proof. I will then reward you both with another ten ounces of gold. I shall be waiting for good news. Be sure not to delay."

In Song times, prisoners who were to be exiled were always tattooed on the face. To make it sound better, the mark was called "the golden print."

The three finished their wine, Lu Qian paid the bill, then all left the tavern and went their separate ways.

Dong Chao and Xue Ba, after dividing the gold, returned to their homes and finished packing. Then they took their official staves, called for Lin Chong at the guard house, and set out from the city. They travelled more than thirty *li* before calling a halt. In Song days, guards escorting a prisoner did not have to pay for lodging in public inns. Xue and Dong brought Lin Chong to an inn, and they stayed the night.

At dawn the next morning, the guards lit a fire and made breakfast, and the three continued their journey to Cangzhou. It was the height of summer and the weather was scorching. Lin Chong had not suffered much when he was beaten. But now a few days had passed, and the fiery heat irritated his wounds. He walked painfully, with dragging steps.

"Stupid clod," Xue Ba said. "It's over two thousand *li* from here to Cangzhou. Who knows when we'll get there, at the rate you're going!"

"I was buffeted a bit in the marshal's compound, and then, the other day, I was beaten with bamboos. My wounds are paining me in this awful heat," Lin Chong explained. "Please, sirs, don't be impatient."

"Just take your time," said Dong Chao. "Never mind his grumbling."

Xue Ba kept complaining and cursing all along the road. "It's our misfortune to have run into a wretched demon like you," he berated Lin Chong.

As the day was drawing to a close, the three again put up at a village inn. Entering the door, the guards rested their staves and removed their packs. Lin Chong also dropped his luggage bundle. Before the guards could say

anything, he took out some pieces of silver and told the attendant to bring wine, meat and rice, and set the table. Lin then invited the guards to dine with him.

Dong Chao and Xue Ba ordered still more wine, plying Lin Chong with it until he fell over on his side, wooden rack and all. Xue Ba then boiled a large pot of water. When it was bubbling hot he poured it into a basin.

“Wash your feet, Arms Instructor,” he said. “You'll sleep better.”

Lin Chong struggled to a sitting position, but he couldn't lean forward because of the rack.

“I'll wash them for you,” Xue Ba offered.

“How could I impose upon you?” Lin Chong hastily replied.

“Men travelling together shouldn't be ceremonious over such details,” said Xue Ba.

Lin Chong didn't realize it was a plot. He stretched out his legs. Xue Ba seized them and plunged them into the boiling water.

“Aiya!” exclaimed Lin Chong, hurriedly pulling his feet out. They had turned red and swollen. “I mustn't trouble you!” he cried.

“Plenty of prisoners have looked after guards, but how often do you see a guard serving a prisoner?” said Xue Ba. “With the best of intentions I wash his feet, but he has the nerve to complain—the water's too cold, the water's too hot.... If this isn't returning evil for good I don't know what is!”

He grumbled and swore half the night.

Not daring to reply, Lin Chong could only fall over and lie on his side.

The two guards poured out the boiling water, filled the basin afresh, then went to wash their feet outside.

They slept until the fourth watch, rising while the rest of the inn was still in bed. Xue Ba heated some water to wash with, and cooked breakfast. Lin Chong, dizzy, was unable to eat and barely able to walk. Xue Ba threatened him with his staff. Dong Chao untied from his belt a pair of new straw sandals with loops and bindings of woven hemp. He told Lin Chong to put them on. Lin Chong's scalded feet were covered with blisters. He wanted his old soft sandals, but they were nowhere to be found. He had to put the new ones on.

The waiter added up the bill and the guards led Lin Chong from the inn. It was by now the fifth watch.

Before Lin Chong had gone more than two or three *li,* the blisters on his feet, broken by the new straw sandals, bled freely. He could hardly drag himself along and he groaned ceaselessly.

“Walk! Faster!” shouted Xue Ba. “Keep moving or I'll help you with this staff.”

“Have pity on me, good officer,” Lin Chong pleaded. “Would I dare slow down deliberately and delay our journey? It's because my feet are killing me. I can't walk.”

“You can lean on me,” said Dong Chao. He supported Lin Chong. But since the arms instructor walked with difficulty, they covered only four or five *li.*

It became obvious that Lin Chong really couldn't go much farther. They saw ahead of them a wild evil wood shrouded in mist. Known as Wild Boar Forest, it was the first dangerous place on the road from Kaifeng to Cangzhou. During the Song Dynasty, those who had grudges against prisoners being sent into exile often bribed their escorts to murder them there. Who can say how many good men lost their lives in that wood?

Now, the two guards led Lin Chong straight into the forest.

“In the whole fifth watch we haven't even walked ten *li,*” said Dong Chao. “We'll never reach Cangzhou at this rate.”

“I'm tired,” said Xue Ba. “Let's rest here.”

The three men walked deeper into the forest, then removed their packs and placed them at the foot of a tree. Lin Chong groaned. With his back against a tree trunk he slid to the ground.

“Having to wait for you every time we take a step has worn me out too,” said Dong Chao. “I want to sleep a while, then we'll go on.”

They rested their staves and lay down beside a tree. But no sooner had they closed their eyes than they leaped up with an exclamation.

“What's wrong, good officers?” asked Lin Chong.

“We were just about to sleep when we remembered that there are no doors and locks here. We're afraid you'll run off. We're worried, so we can't sleep in peace.”

“I'm a respectable man. Since I've already been convicted, I'd never run away.”

“Who can believe that?” scoffed Dong Chao. “The only way we can really feel secure is to tie you up.”

“It that's what you good officers want, how can I refuse?”

Xue Ba took a rope from his waist and bound Lin Chong hand and foot and tied him, together with the rack, tightly to the tree. Then he and Dong Chao sprang up, whirled around, seized their staves and advanced on Lin Chong.

“Killing you isn't our idea,” they said. “The other day Captain Lu Qian informed us of the order of Marshal Gao. We're to finish you off here and return immediately with the golden print. Even if we travelled a few more days, it would still be your death march. Doing the job here, we can get back that much earlier. Don't blame us two brothers. We're only carrying out orders. We have no choice. You must know: A year from this day will be the first anniversary of your death! We've been given a time limit. We must return quickly with our report.”

When Lin Chong heard this, his tears fell like rain. “Officers,” he cried, “there's never been any enmity between us. Spare me, and I'll never forget you in this world or the next!”

“Empty talk,” said Dong Chao. “You can't be saved!”

Xue Ba raised his official staff and swung it fiercely at Lin Chong's head.

What a pity that a hero's life should vanish like a dream!

There are no inns on the long road to the Nether Regions. In whose home can a wandering spirit rest in the deep of night?

Did Lin Chong live or die? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 9
Chai Jin Keeps Open House for All Bold Men
Lin Chong Defeats Instructor Hong in a Bout with Staves

Xue Ba raised his staff with both hands to bring it down on Lin Chong's head. But quicker man words can tell, from behind the pine tree came a thunderous roar as a solid iron rod shot forward, intercepted the staff and sent it flying into the sky. Then out leaped a big fat monk.

“I've been listening quite a while,” he yelled. Dressed in a black cassock, he was wearing a knife and carried a Buddhist staff which he brandished at the two guards.

Lin Chong, who had just opened his eyes, recognized Sagacious Lu, and he hastily cried: “Brother! Stay your hand. I have something to say!”

Sagacious lowered his iron staff. The guards gaped at him, too frightened to move.

“It's not their doing,” said Lin Chong. “Marshal Gao, through Captain Lu Qian, gave them orders to destroy me. How could they refuse? It would be wrong to kill them!”

Unsheathing his knife, Sagacious cut the arms instructor's bonds and helped him to his feet.

“Brother,” he said, “I've been worried about you ever since that day we parted, when you bought the sword. After you were convicted, I had no way to rescue you. I heard that you were being exiled to Cangzhou, and I sought you outside Kaifeng Prefecture, but in vain. Someone said that you had been locked in a guard house. Then I learned that a waiter had gone to the two guards, saying: 'A gentleman wishes to speak to you in the tavern;' and I became suspicious. I was afraid these oafs would try to harm you along the road, so I followed.

“When these knaves brought you to the inn, I put up there too. I heard them plotting in whispers. When they tricked you and scalded your feet in the boiling water, I wanted to kill them on the spot. But there were too many guests at the inn and I was afraid I couldn't carry it off. I knew the rogues were up to something dirty. I was very worried.”

“You set out before dawn at the fifth watch. I hurried ahead to the forest and waited to kill the two wretches here. They intended to harm you, so I ought to destroy them.”

“Since you've saved me, brother, there's no need to kill them,” urged Lin Chong.

“Scurvy knaves,” bellowed Sagacious. “If it weren't for my brother here, I'd pound you both into mincemeat! Only because he asks it, I'll spare your lives.” He put his knife away and shouted: “Support my brother, and be quick about it! Come with me!” Taking his staff he set off.

How dared they refuse? “Save us, Instructor Lin,” the guards pleaded. They again shouldered their packs and took up their staves. Supporting Lin Chong and carrying his bundle, they followed the monk out of the forest.

After walking three or four *li,* they saw a little tavern at the entrance to a village. All four went in and sat down. They ordered five or six catties of meat, two jugs of wine and some griddle cakes. The waiter laid the table and served the wine.

“My we presume to inquire,” the guards said to Sagacious, “in what monastery you reside, Reverend?”

Sagacious chuckled. “Why do you ask, scoundrels? So that you can tell Marshal Gao how to harm me? Others may fear him, I don't! If I meet that wretch I'll give him three hundred licks of my iron staff!”

The guards dared say no more.

The four finished the meat and wine, got their luggage in order, paid the bill and left the village.

“Where are you planning to go, brother?” asked Lin Chong.

“'To kill a man you must draw blood, to rescue a man you must see him to safety.' I still don't feel at ease about you, brother. I'm going to escort you all me way to Cangzhou.”

The two guards secretly groaned: “Woe! That ruins our scheme! What will we say when we get back?” But they could only continue the journey, docilely obeying the monk's orders.

From then on, they marched when Sagacious wanted to march, and rested when he wanted to rest. How dared they oppose him? In a good mood, he merely cursed them, in a bad, he beat them. Neither of the guards dared say a word for fear of arousing the monk's ire.

After marching two more stages, they hired a cart. Lin Chong rested on it, while the other three walked behind. The guards had guilty consciences and were anxious to preserve their lives, so they tagged along cautiously.

On the road, Sagacious frequently bought wine and meat for Lin Chong, and the guards were permitted to join him. When the party came to an inn, they would retire early and rise late. Of course, the guards lit the fires and did the cooking. Who dared to disobey the monk?

They conferred worriedly in private. “We've become the prisoners and the monk the escort. When we get back, Marshal Gao will surely punish us.”

“I've heard that a newly arrived monk has been put in charge of the Great Xiangguo Monastery's vegetable fields,” said Xue Ba. “He's called Sagacious Lu. This must be the man. Let's tell the truth when we get back. We'll say that we wanted to finish Lin Chong off in Wild Boar Forest, but that the monk rescued him and went with us all the way to Cangzhou. That was why we couldn't do the job. We'll return the ten ounces of gold to Captain Lu Qian. Let him settle accounts with the monk himself! All you and I want is to be clear of the whole thing.”

“My feelings exactly,” said Dong Chao.

Of their discussion we shall say no more.

To make a long story short, they marched for seventeen or eighteen days, with the monk never relaxing his watch over the two guards. Soon they were only about seventy *li* from Cangzhou. It was a well-travelled road the rest of the way, with no desolate stretches. After inquiring to make sure of this, Sagacious led the party into a pine grove to rest.

“Brother,” he said to Lin Chong, “From here to Cangzhou is not far. There are plenty of people on the road and no deserted places. I've already checked on it. I'll part with you here. Some day we'll meet again.”

“Go back, brother. Let my father-in-law know I'm all right,” said Lin Chong. “If I live, I'll repay you for your gracious protection in full.”

Sagacious took out a score or more ounces of silver and gave them to Lin Chong, then handed two or three ounces to the guards.

“Scurvy knaves! Originally I was going to cut your heads off along the road. Out of courtesy to my brother I've spared your paltry lives. The journey is nearly over. Don't get any evil ideas!”

“Would we dare? It was all Marshal Gao's doing,” they replied, and accepted the silver.

As they turned to leave, Sagacious glared and shouted: “Wretches! Are your heads harder than this pine tree?”

“We humble servants have heads only of the flesh and skin our parents gave us, wrapped around a few bones.”

Sagacious raised his iron staff and struck the tree a mighty blow, cutting a gash two inches deep. The pine folded over neatly and fell.

“Scurvy knaves,” roared the monk. “If you get any wrong ideas, I'll clout your heads like I did this pine!”

Dragging his iron staff and swinging his other arm, Sagacious walked off, calling: “Take care of yourself, brother.”

The two guards stuck out their tongues in astonishment. It was some time before they remembered to retract them.

“Let's go, good officers,” said Lin Chong.

“Terrific,” exclaimed the guards. “With one blow he snaps a tree in half!”

“That's nothing,” said Lin Chong. “Back in the monastery, he pulled a willow tree up by the roots!”

The two guards wagged their heads. This confirmed their guess about the monk's identity.

Leaving the grove, the three continued walking until noon. Down the highway they observed a tavern. They entered, and Lin Chong invited the guards to sit at the head of the table. Dong and Xue relaxed for the first time that day.

The tavern contained several tables, and the four or five waiters were busy rushing from one to another serving food and drink. Lin Chong and the guards sat for nearly an hour, but no one came to take their order.

Finally, Lin Chong pounded on the table and shouted impatiently: “Ho, tavern keeper, how dare you abuse a customer? You see that I'm a prisoner, so you ignore me! I can pay for what we eat. What's the meaning of this?”

“You don't understand,” said the tavern keeper. “My intentions were good.”

“You don't sell me wine or meat. What's good-intentioned about that?”

“You don't understand. In our village there's a wealthy man called Chai Jin, known in these parts as Lord Chai. In the fraternity of bold men, all address him as Small Whirlwind. He's descendant of the Later Zhou Dynasty royal family. When the last Later Zhou emperor surrendered his throne, the first Song emperor bestowed on Chai's ancestors a 'Wrought Iron Pledge'. Since then, no one has dared to molest his family.

“Chai Jin makes a practice of welcoming all bold men. He's always supporting forty or fifty of them in his home. He's left instructions with us at the tavern: 'Tell any prisoner on route to exile to come to my manor. I will help him with money.' If I sold you meat and drink today and you ate until you were red in the face, he would say that you have money and don't need his help. My intentions were good.”

Lin Chong turned to the guards. “When I was giving arms instruction to the soldiers in the Eastern Capital, I often heard military men speak of Lord Chai. So this is where he comes from! Why don't we pay him a call?”

Xue Ba and Dong Chao thought it over, then said: “Since we're already here, what have we got to lose?”

They collected their luggage and asked the tavern keeper: “Where is Lord Chai's manor? We want to visit him.”

“Go straight ahead for about three *li* until you cross a big stone bridge. One or two turns, and you'll see a large estate. That's it.”

Lin Chong and the guards thanked the tavern keeper and set out. After marching about three *li,* sure enough, they came to a big stone bridge. They crossed to the other side where they found a smooth broad road. In the distance, amid many green willows, they could see the outlines of a manor. A wide moat, flowing around the four sides, was fringed on both banks by large weeping willows. Through the trees, the white outer wall of the manor was faintly visible.

After a few more turns down the road, they neared the entrance. Four or five vassals were sitting on a plank bridge, enjoying the cool breeze. Lin Chong and the guards approached and bowed to the vassals. The arms instructor asked: “Could I trouble you to report to Lord Chai that a prisoner named Lin, on his way to exile from the capital, requests to see him?”

“You're out of luck,” said the vassals. “If His Lordship were at home, you'd receive wine and food and money. But he left this morning to go hunting.”

“When will he return?”

“Hard to say. Probably he's resting at the eastern manor, but maybe not. We can't tell you for sure.”

“That's my misfortune. I won't be able to meet him. Let's go back,” said Lin Chong to the guards.

The three men took leave of the vassals and returned along the same road on which they had come. Lin Chong felt very depressed.

They walked more than half a *li.* Far off they saw a column of horsemen dash out of a grove and come galloping in the direction of the estate. On a snow-white steed with a curly mane rode a noble-looking gentleman. He had the brows of a dragon and the eyes of a phoenix, gleaming white teeth and ruble red lips. Drooping mustaches framed his mouth, below which was a slim goatee. About thirty-five years of age, he wore a black flowered silk hat with curled-up corners, and was dressed in a figured purple gown with designs embroidered on the chest. Around his waist was a handsome girdle inlaid with precious jade. On his feet were black boots with green stripes and filigreed gold thread. He carried a bow and a quiver of arrows.

The long line of riders raced towards the manor.

“Can that be Lord Chai?” Lin Chong wondered. But he didn't dare to ask.

The young nobleman turned his white horse out of the column and trotted up to Lin Chong.

“Who is this gentleman wearing the rack?” the nobleman asked.

Lin quickly bowed and replied: “Your humble servant is called Lin Chong, formerly an arms instructor in the Eastern Capital's Imperial Guards. Because I offended Marshal Gao, he invented an excuse to send me to Kaifeng Prefecture and have me sentenced to exile in Cangzhou. We were told at the village tavern that the gallant hero who lives here, Lord Chai, keeps open house for men of talent. But my luck was poor and I was unable to find him.”

Leaping from his saddle, the gentleman rushed forward, crying: “I am Chai Jin. A thousand apologies for not being at home to welcome you!” He fell to his knees on the grass and clasped his hands in salute.

Lin Chong hastily returned the courtesy. The gentleman took him by the hand and led him towards the manor. The vassals saw them coming and pushed wide the gates. Chai Jin led Lin Chong directly to the ceremonial hall, where the two men again exchanged obeisances.

“I have long known of your fame,” said Chai Jin, “Who would have thought that today you would come to our humble place! To be able to gaze on your respected countenance is one of the happiest events of my life!”

“Your Lordship's name is honored everywhere. It is revered by all. I never thought that because I was convicted and was passing here on my way to exile I would have the joy of meeting you!”

At Chai Jin's insistence, Lin Chong took the chair of honor at the table. Xue Ba and Dong Chao also were seated. The men who had accompanied Chai Jin on the hunt led their horses into the rear compound and retired. Of them we shall say no more.

Chai Jin ordered his vassals to bring wine. Before long they served a platter of meat and one of griddle cakes and a pot of warmed wine. Then came another platter heaped with rice. On top of the rice were ten strings of cash.

“These rustics don't recognize a man of quality,” said Chai Jin. “How can they value the arms instructor so lightly? Ho! Take these things back. Bring

fine fruit and wine. Slaughter a sheep. Be quick."

"Please, no more, Your Lordship," protested Lin Chong, rising politely. "This is quite enough."

"You mustn't say that. It's a rare privilege to have you here. We can't be remiss in courtesy."

The vassals soon came rushing in with fruit and wine. Chai Jin stood up and handed out three full goblets. Lin Chong thanked him and drained his cup. The two guards also drank.

"Excuse me a moment, Arms Instructor," said Chai Jin.

He took off his bow bag and quiver of arrows, went over to the guards and asked them to down a drink with him. Then he seated himself in the host's chair. Lin Chong occupied the chair of the guest of honor. The two guards sat beside him. All chatted idly for a time of bold adventures and feats of arms.

Before they knew it, the sun had sunk in the west. Wine, food, fruit and delicacies from the sea were set upon the table. Toasting each guest personally, Chai Jin drank three rounds. Then he resumed his seat and called: "Bring the soup."

After the soup was consumed, and six or seven more goblets of wine, a vassal entered and announced: "The teacher has come."

"Good. Invite him to sit with us and meet our guests," said Chai Jin. "Bring another setting."

The new arrival entered and Lin Chong rose to greet him. Cap tilted to one side, chest protruding, the man swaggered into the hall. "That vassal referred to him as teacher," thought Lin Chong. "He must be His Lordship's arms teacher." Hastily bowing, the arms instructor intoned: "Lin Chong tenders his respects."

Completely ignoring him, the man did not return his salutation. Lin Chong dared not raise his head.

Chai Jin said to the man, whom he called Arms instructor Hong: “This is Arms Instructor Lin who teaches the art of spears and staves in the Eastern Capital's Imperial Guards. You two should know each other.”

Lin Chong immediately dropped to his knees and kowtowed.

Arms Instructor Hong said brusquely: “Don't kowtow. Get up.” He himself didn't even bow.

Chai Jin was annoyed. Lin Chong kowtowed twice, then rose and begged Hong to be seated. Without even a pretence of courtesy, the fellow promptly took the guest of honor's chair. Chai Jin was quite displeased. Lin Chong slipped into the next seat. The two guards sat down beside him.

“Why is Your Lordship so courteous to an exiled man?” Arms Instructor Hong asked.

“This gentleman is not an ordinary person. He's an arms instructor in the Mighty Imperial Guards. How can you regard him lightly, Teacher?”

“Because Your Lordship is fond of feats of arms, these exiled men are always coming to enjoy your bounty. Anyone who says: 'I'm an arms instructor in spears and staves,' can call at the manor and get food and drink and money and rice! Your Lordship is too gullible.”

Lin Chong said nothing, but Chai Jin retorted: “It's difficult to tell from appearances. You shouldn't underestimate him.”

Stung by this last remark, Hong leaped to his feet. “I don't believe him. If he dares to take me on in a bout with staves, then I'll admit he's genuine arms instructor!”

Chai Jin laughed. “Not a bad idea. Arms Instructor Lin, what do you say?”

“Your humble servant couldn't presume to such a thing,” said Lin Chong.

Hong thought to himself: “He doesn't know how to fight, that's sure. He's afraid.” And so he insisted that Lin Chong accept his challenge.

Chai Jin not only wanted to see an exhibition of Lin's skill, he wanted him to beat Hong and shut the oaf's mouth. “Bring wine,” he called. “We'll drink first. The match can wait till the moon is high.”

By the time they had consumed another six or seven rounds, the moon had risen and was shining in with such brilliance that the hall was as bright as day. Chai Jin stood up and said: “Arms Instructors, please give us a bout.”

Lin Chong thought to himself: “This Instructor Hong must be Chai Jin's arms teacher. If I beat him, His Lordship will lost face.”

Observing Lin Chong's hesitation, Chai Jin said: “Instructor Hong has not been here long either. No one has taken him on. Please don't refuse, Master Lin. I am most eager to see the skill of you two instructors.” Chai Jin said this to indicate that Lin need have no fears of offending him, and that he should not hold back.

Lin Chong at last felt reassured.

“Come on, come on,” cried Hong, rising. “I'll give you a bout with staves!”

Everyone surged out of the hall into the courtyard. Vassals brought a bundle of wooden staves and laid them on the ground. Hong removed his outer robe and tied up his skirts. Selecting a staff, he struck a fighting pose.

“Come on, come on,” he urged.

“Instructor Lin,” said Chai Jin, “please start the bout.”

“Don't laugh at my clumsiness, Your Lordship,” Lin Chong begged. He chose a staff and said to Hong: “Master, please teach me.”

Hong glared as if wanting to swallow him down in one gulp. Lin Chong advanced holding the staff extended in both hands. Hong rapped his staff sharply on the ground and rushed at Lin.

After the two arms instructors had fought four or five rounds in the bright moonlight, Lin Chong leaped out of the combat circle. “Halt the bout,” he cried.

“Why won't you show us your skill, Instructor?” queried Chai Jin.

“I've lost,” said Lin.

“But you haven't fought to a conclusion. How can you say you've lost?”

“If I have to fight with this rack around my neck, I may just as well consider myself defeated.”

“How thoughtless of me,” Chai Jin laughed. “That can be remedied easily enough.”

He directed his vassals to fetch ten ounces of silver. When the money was brought he said to the two guards: “May I trouble you to take Lin Chong's rack off temporarily? If there's any question raised about this when you arrive at the Cangzhou Prison, I will bear all responsibility. Divide these ten ounces between you.”

Chai Jin looked so lofty and dignified that the guards didn't dare refuse. They wanted to stay in Chai's good graces and wanted the silver as well. Since there was no danger of Lin Chong running away, Xue Ba removed the wooden collar from his neck.

“Now the two masters can continue their match,” said Chai Jin joyfully.

Because Lin's tactics had been cautious, Hong regarded him with scorn. Raising his staff, he prepared to resume combat.

“Just a moment,” Chai Jin exclaimed. He ordered his vassals to bring an ingot of silver weighing twenty-five ounces. In no time at all, the ingot was produced.

“A match between you two instructors is no ordinary contest,” said Chai Jin. “Whoever wins gets this silver as a prize.” He was hoping in this way

to encourage Lin Chong to display his skill. Deliberately, he tossed the ingot on the ground.

Hong was very annoyed that Lin Chong had come, and he coveted the big piece of silver. What's more, he was worried that a defeat would lower his prestige. Vigorously, he struck a fighting pose, then executed an opening flourish called “lifting the torch to sear the heavens.”

“His Lordship wants me to defeat him,” thought Lin Chong. First holding his staff level, he performed a move called “separating the grass to find the snake.”

“Come on, come on,” yelled Hong.

He swung his staff downwards. Lin dodged back. Hong pressed forward another pace. Raising his staff, he again chopped down. Lin Chong saw that he was off balance and brought his staff sweeping upwards from the ground. Hong had no time to recover. He tried to twist out of the way, but Lin's staff cracked him hard on the shin bones. Hong dropped his staff and fell heavily.

Delighted, Chai Jin called for wine and presented Lin Chong with a congratulatory goblet. The watchers all laughed. Hong struggled but was unable to rise to his feet. Grinning vassals helped him up. Hong, shamefaced, limped away and left the manor.

Chai took Lin Chong by the hand and led him into the rear hall and feasted him with wine. He directed vassals to present Lin with the prize. Lin tried to refuse, but his host insisted, and finally he was compelled to accept.

Chai Jin kept Lin Chong at the manor for several days, entertaining him daily with excellent wines and delicious food. After another six or seven days, since the guards were pressing Lin to leave, Chai gave him a farewell banquet. He also wrote two letters which he handed to the arms instructor.

“The prefect of Cangzhou is a good friend of mine,” he said, “I'm also on intimate terms with both the warden and head keeper of the garrison prison. Give these letters to them and they'll be sure to treat you well.”

He presented Lin Chong with another ingot of twenty-five ounces of silver, and bestowed five ounces on the two guards. They feasted all night.

Early the next morning, after breakfast, Chai Jin directed a few vassals to go with them and carry their luggage. The rack was again fastened around Lin Chong's neck. Chai Jin accompanied the party to the manor gate.

“I will send someone with winter clothing for you in a few days,” he said to Lin Chong in parting.

“I don't know how to express my gratitude to Your Lordship,”' said Lin Chong. The guards also thanked Chai Jin, then the three departed for Cangzhou. They arrived about noon and sent the luggage bearers back. The guards went directly to the prefecture and presented their order of exile to an official, who immediately brought Lin Chong before the prefect. Accepting custody of the arms instructor, the prefect issued a receipt and wrote out an order committing Lin Chong to prison. The guards bade Lin farewell and departed for the Eastern Capital. Of them we shall say no more.

We'll tell of Lin Chong after he was escorted to the prison. He was placed in a room by himself and directed to await registration. The other prisoners came to see him.

“The warden and the head keeper here are very bad,” they said. “They only want to extort money. If you can bribe them, they treat you well. If you have no money, they throw you in the dungeon where you pray for life and long for death, both in vain! If their palms are greased, you can avoid the hundred blows they give all new prisoners to beat discipline into them. You need only say you're ill and the matter will be postponed indefinitely. Otherwise, it's a hundred strokes that will leave you more dead than alive.”

“It's good of you brothers to advise me. If I were to give money, how much would be enough?”

“To do it properly, five ounces of silver for the warden and five for the head keeper would be just about right.”

As they were talking, the head keeper came over and asked: “Which one of you is the new arrival?”

Lin Chong stepped forward. “I am that humble person.” When the head keeper saw that the arms instructor failed to produce any money, his face darkened.

Shaking his finger at Lin, he shouted: “You wretched exile! How dare you not bow and hail me respectfully when I enter? I've heard all about your carryings-on in Kaifeng! Where do you get the gall to behave so insolently in my presence? I can read from the lines on your face that you're destined for nothing but hunger! You'll never rise in the world! What you need is plenty of beatings, you stubborn jail-bird! For better or worse, you're in my hands now, you felonious wretch! I'll pulverize your bones and pound your flesh to jelly soon enough!”

The keeper cursed vigorously while Lin Chong stood with bowed head. At this storm of invective, the other prisoners fled.

Lin Chong waited until the head keeper had blown off most of his steam, then took out five ounces of silver and handed them to him with a smile. “A trifling gift, brother. Please don't despise it.”

“Is this for me and the warden both?”

“Just for you, brother. In addition, here's another ten ounces for the warden. I must trouble you to deliver them to him.”

The head keeper grinned broadly. “Arms Instructor Lin, I've heard of your good name before. You're truly a splendid fellow. Marshal Gao has framed you, no doubt about it. Although, for the time being, you have to suffer this inconvenience, I'm sure you'll eventually make your mark. A man with your reputation and talents never waits around idly for long! One of these days you'll be a big official.”

Lin Chong laughed. “I'm entirely dependent on your kindness.”

“You can rest assured,” said the head keeper.

Giving him Chai Jin's letters, Lin Chong said: “May I trouble you to deliver these?”

“Letters from Lord Chai? Then you've nothing to worry about. They're worth an ingot of gold each! I'll deliver them now. In a little while, the warden will send for you to be registered. When he orders the hundred blows, say that you were ill during your journey and that you still haven't recovered. I'll speak up for you. We must make it look genuine.”

“Many thanks.”

The head keeper took the silver and the letters and departed, leaving Lin Chong alone in the room. The arms instructor sighed. “'With money you can reach even the gods.' A bitter truth indeed.”

To the warden, the head keeper gave only the five ounces which Lin Chong had originally presented to him. “Lin Chong is an excellent man,” he confided. “Here is a letter of introduction from Lord Chai. It seems that Marshal Gao had him exiled on a trumped-up charge. There's nothing much to the whole thing....”

“Since Lord Chai has sent us this letter,” said the warden, “we must look after him.” He directed that Lin Chong be summoned.

To get back to Lin Chong. He was brooding alone in his room when a turnkey shouted: “The warden orders that new prisoner Lin Chong report to the warden's hall to be registered.”

Lin Chong went directly to the hall.

“You are a new prisoner,” said the warden. “The first emperor of Song has bequeathed to us the ancient regulation: 'One hundred blows must be administered to every prisoner newly sent into exile.' Guards! Get him ready!”

“Your humble servant caught a bad cold during his journey here, and still hasn't recovered,” said Lin Chong. “I request that the beating be postponed.”

“He's not at all well,” said the head keeper. “Please have pity on him.”

“Since the symptoms of his illness are still evident, perhaps we can put this off for the time being,” said the warden. “We can beat him when he regains his health.”

“Today, the time is up of that prisoner who has been taking care of the garrison prison temple. Why not let Lin Chong replace him,” suggested the head keeper.

The warden promptly wrote out an order and the head keeper accompanied Lin Chong back to his room, where he collected his belongings, then led him to the temple.

“I'm being very considerate to you, Arms Instructor Lin, getting you this job,” said the head keeper. “It's the easiest work in the garrison prison. All you have to do is burn incense and sweep the floor once in the morning and once again in the evening. You'll soon see that we don't let up on other prisoners from morning till night. As for those without money, we throw them into the dungeon where they pray for life and long for death, both in vain.”

“Thanks for your protection,” said Lin Chong. He gave the head keeper another few ounces of silver. “There's one more matter I must trouble you about, brother. Could you have this rack taken from my neck?”

“Just leave it to me,” said the head keeper as he tucked the money away. He hurried to the warden and relayed the plea. The rack was removed.

From then on, Lin Chong slept and ate in the temple. Every day, he did nothing except burn incense and sweep the floor. Before he knew it, forty or fifty days had gone by. The warden and the head keeper, having been bribed, were always very cordial. He was left free to come and go as he pleased, with no restrictions. Lord Chai sent a man with winter clothing and other gifts. All the prisoners became recipients of Lin Chong's charity.

To make a long story short, one day around noon as winter was drawing near, Lin Chong was strolling outside the garrison gates.

Suddenly, he heard someone behind him call: “Arms Instructor Lin, what are you doing here?”

Lin Chong turned around and looked.

And as a result of seeing the man who hailed him: Fire and flames nearly put an end to his life. In the wind and snow he narrowly escaped suffering mortal wounds.

Who was the man whom Lin Chong saw? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 10
Lin Chong Shelters from the Snowstorm in the Mountain Spirit Temple
Captain Lu Qian Sets Fire to the Fodder Depot

Lin Chong was strolling along, when someone behind him called his name. He turned around and saw the tavern waiter Li Xiao-er. When they first became acquainted in the Eastern Capital, Lin had helped him financially several times. Later, Xiao-er stole money from the tavern keeper and was arrested. He was going to be sent to the prefect but Lin Chong spoke up in his behalf, and he did not have to stand trial. Lin also paid back the money for him and he was released. Although Xiao-er could no longer find work in the capital, thanks to the travelling expenses which Lin gave him, he was able to seek employment elsewhere. Today, unexpectedly, they met again in Cangzhou.

“What are you doing here, Brother Xiao-er?” asked Lin Chong.

Xiao-er kowtowed and replied, “After you saved me, benefactor, and gave me travelling money, I looked everywhere for a job, but in vain. Finally, I wandered into Cangzhou. Here, a tavern keeper named Wang took me on as his assistant. Because I was a hard worker and could make tasty dishes and sauces, the customers praised me and business improved. The tavern keeper had a daughter, and he gave her to me in marriage and adopted me into his household. Now, both he and my mother-in-law are dead. Only my wife and I are left. We run a tavern in front of the garrison. I was just passing by on my way to collect some bills. What are you doing here, benefactor?”

Lin pointed to the mark on his face. “Because I crossed the will of Marshal Gao, he conspired against me and had me convicted and exiled to this place. At present, I look after the garrison prison temple. I don't know what they'll do with me in the future. I never expected to meet you here.”

Xiao-er brought Lin Chong to his home, invited him to be seated, and called his wife in to greet him. Both husband and wife said happily. “We have no close relatives. Your coming here today, benefactor, is like a gift from heaven!”

“I'm an exile,” said Lin. “Won't associating with me sully your name?”

“How can you talk like that?” said Xiao-er. “Everyone knows your excellent reputation. Be sure to bring all your washing and mending to my wife.”

He entertained Lin Chong with food and drink and that night saw him back to the garrison temple. The following morning, he came again to invite Lin to his home.

From then on, Xiao-er and Lin called on each other frequently. Xiao-er often sent tea or soup to Lin in the garrison. Moved by the couple's respect and devotion, Lin gave them money from time to time to use in their business.

To skip the idle chatter, time passed quickly. Winter came. All of Lin Chong's padded winter garments were stitched and mended by Xiao-er's wife. One day, while Xiao-er was cooking in the entry, a man slipped in and sat down inside at one of the tables. Then another fellow furtively entered. The first man was an army officer, by the looks of him. The second seemed more like an attendant. He also hurried in and sat down.

Xiao-er went up to them. “Wine?” he queried.

The officer handed Xiao-er an ounce of silver. “Take this on account. Bring us three or four jugs of good wine. When our guests come, serve some food and tidbits. You choose the dishes. You needn't ask me.”

“You've invited guests, sir?”

“I must trouble you to go to the garrison prison and invite the warden and the head keeper here for a chat. If they question you, just say: 'A gentleman requests that you come and discuss certain matters. He is looking forward to your arrival.'”

Xiao-er assented and left. At the garrison, he first relayed the request to the head keeper then, together, they extended the invitation to the warden, after

which all three went to the tavern. The gentleman, the warden and the head keeper exchanged greetings.

“We haven't met before,” said the warden. “May we ask your name, sir?”

“I have a letter of introduction here, which I will give you shortly,” replied the man. “But first let's have some wine.”

Xiao-er quickly opened the jugs and served the food. The gentleman called for a ceremonial tray of wine goblets. After filling and handing them out, he invited his guests to be seated. Xiao-er dashed back and forth like a shuttle, serving without cease. The gentleman's attendant took care of the warming of the wine. A dozen rounds were drunk, more tidbits to go with the wine were ordered.

“My attendant will warm the wine,” the gentleman said to Xiao-er. “You needn't come unless we call you. We want to talk privately.”

Xiao-er said: “Very well, sir,” and left the room. Outside the door, he conferred with his wife.

“There's something fishy about those two.”

“What do you mean?”

“They've both got Eastern Capital accents and neither of them knows the warden. When I went in with those tidbits just now, I heard the head keeper murmur something about 'Marshal Gao'. Wasn't he the one who harmed Instructor Lin? I'll stay here at the door and keep an eye on them. You go and listen on the other side of the partition wall.”

“Why not bring Instructor Lin here from the garrison and see if he recognizes them?”

“You don't know what a terrible temper he has. He's liable to commit murder and burn the place down. If I called him and that gentleman turned out to be the Captain Lu he mentioned the other day, Lin would never let

him escape alive. If anything happened here, you and I would be involved. You'd better go and listen. We'll decide what to do later."

"Very well," said the wife. She went and listened for a time. Then she returned and said: "They're whispering with their heads together and I couldn't hear much. But I saw that fellow who looks like an officer take something wrapped in a white cloth from his attendant and give it to the warden and head keeper. Maybe there's money in it. I heard the head keeper say: 'Leave everything to us. We'll finish him off, come what may.'"

Just then, from the inner room a voice shouted: "Bring the soup." Xiao-er hastened to comply. As he entered, he saw that the warden had a letter in his hand. Xiao-er served the soup, then brought some more dishes of food.

The feast continued for another hour. After the bill was paid, the warden and head keeper departed first. The other two, heads stealthily lowered, then also left.

Shortly afterwards, Lin Chong entered the tavern. "Brother Xiao-er," he said, "I hope you're prospering."

"Please sit down, benefactor," Xiao-er begged hastily. "I was just about to look for you. I must tell you something very important."

"What is it?" asked Lin Chong.

Xiao-er led him to the inner room, invited him to be seated, and told him all about his recent customers. "I don't know who these fellows are," he said in conclusion, "but I don't trust them. I'm afraid they want to harm you, benefactor."

"What do they look like?" asked Lin.

"One is of average build, fair, clean shaven, about thirty or so. The other fellow isn't very tall either. He has a ruddy complexion."

Startled, Lin Chong cried, "That man of thirty must be Captain Lu Qian! The filthy thief, how dare he come here to harm me! If I get hold of him I'll

smash him to a jelly!”

“The main thing is to be on your guard,” said Xiao-er. “'Take care not to choke when you eat, or trip when you walk,' as the old saying goes.”

Lin Chong left Xiao-er's home in a towering rage. On the street, he bought a sharp dagger. Carrying it on his person, he made a search of all the streets and lanes. Xiao-er and his wife were in a cold sweat.

At daybreak the following morning, Lin rose, washed his face and rinsed his mouth, then took up the dagger and again prowled through all the streets and lanes both in the city and on the outskirts. He patrolled all day, even searching the prison and the garrison, but nothing was stirring.

Returning to Xiao-er's place, he said: “Nothing happened today either.”

“Benefactor,” said Xiao-er, “let's hope it stays that way! But remain on your guard.”

Lin went back to the garrison prison temple, where he spent the night. He walked the streets for four or five days, without success. His temper gradually began to cool.

On the sixth day, the warden summoned Lin Chong into his hall and said: “You've been here for some time now. For the sake of Lord Chai's prestige, we must improve your lot. Fifteen *li* outside the city's East Gate is a large army fodder depot. Every month you can collect fees from the people delivering the fodder. An old army man is in charge. I've decided to give you the job and have him replace you in the garrison prison temple. Out at the depot you'll be able to earn a little spending money. Go there with the head keeper and take over.”

“I'll do that, sir,” said Lin.

He first left the garrison and went directly to Xiao-er's house. Lin told the couple the news.

“Today, the warden is sending me to take charge of the army fodder depot. What do you think?”

“It's a better place than the garrison prison temple,” replied Xiao-er. “You can earn some regular fees out there. Usually, no one gets that post without paying a bribe.”

“Not only haven't they harmed me, but they've given me this good job instead. I don't know what to make of it.”

“Why be suspicious, benefactor? As long as nothing happens, that's fine. The only trouble is you'll be living quite far from us. After a while, I'll come and see you, when I have time.” Xiao-er pressed Lin Chong to join him in several rounds of drinks.

To make a long story short, the two separated and Lin Chong returned to the garrison prison temple. He packed his belongings, put his dagger in his belt, took up a spear and set out with the head keeper for the fodder depot.

It was a bitterly cold winter day. The sky was overcast, and they walked in the teeth of a rising wind amid thickly swirling snowflakes. Since there was no place along the road to buy drinks, Lin and the keeper soon reached the depot.

Surrounded by an earthen wall, the depot had a gate with two doors. They pushed them open and entered the compound. They saw a thatched building of seven or eight sections, which was serving as a storehouse for fodder. All around were piles of hay. In the center stood a small thatched shack. Inside, they found the old soldier huddled over a fire.

“This is Lin Chong,” the head keeper said to him. “The warden has sent him to replace you. You are to go back to take care of the garrison prison temple. You can hand over your duties.”

The old soldier gave Lin Chong the keys and said: “The stuff in the store-house is under official seal. And those haystacks there are all numbered.”

He took Lin around and counted the stacks, then brought him back to the shack and gathered his belongings. As he was leaving, he said: “I'll give you my brazier, my pot, my bowls and my dishes.”

“I have such things in the temple too,” said Lin. “You can have mine.”

The old soldier pointed to a gourd bottle hanging on the wall. He said: “If you want to buy wine, there's a little market-place two or three *li* east down the road.” Then he and the head keeper departed for the prison.

As to Lin Chong, he placed his bundle and bedding on the bed and sat down to replenish the fire in the earthen brazier. There was some charcoal in a corner of the room, and Lin used a few sticks of them. He looked around the shack. It was very dilapidated and shook with every gust of wind.

“How can I pass the winter here?” thought Lin. “When the storm stops I must bring a mason out from the city to repair this place.”

Although he hugged the fire, he still felt cold. “The old soldier said there was a little market-place two *li* from here,” he recalled. “Why don't I go and buy some wine?”

He took some money from his bundle, tied the gourd bottle to the end of his spear, covered the brazier, put on his broad-brimmed felt hat, took the keys and shut the door of the shack behind him. Coming through the compound gate, he closed and locket it. Then, carrying the keys, he headed east. The snow-covered ground was a mass of tiny white jade flakes. Lin Chong trudged forward with the north wind on his back. It was snowing very hard.

He had gone less than half a *li* when he observed an ancient temple. Lin Chong pressed his palms together before his forehead and bowed. “May the gods protect me. I must come here one of these days and burn some paper money in sacrifice.”

Lin continued on his way. Ahead, he saw a cluster of houses. He halted, and peered through the storm. The buildings were enclosed by a fence. A clump of broom straw hanging outside one of them indicated that this was a tavern. Lin went inside.

“Where are you from, sir?” the host asked.

“Do you recognize this gourd bottle?” Lin Chong countered.

The man looked at it and said: “It belongs to the old soldier at the fodder depot.”

“That's right,” said Lin.

“So you're the new custodian,” said the host. “Please be seated, brother. It's a bitterly cold day. Let me treat you to a few goblets, by way of welcome.”

He served a platter of sliced beef, heated a pot of wine and invited Lin to help himself. Lin bought some more beef, drank a few cups, then had the gourd filled with wine. He wrapped up the two orders of beef, left a few pieces of silver, tied the gourd bottle to the end of his spear and placed the beef inside his shirt.

“Thanks for your trouble,” said Lin. He went out through the fence gate and started back against the wind. Now that night had come, the snow was falling harder than ever.

Plodding through the snow in the teeth of the north wind, Lin Chong hurried back to the fodder depot. When he unlocked the doors and entered the compound, he uttered a cry of dismay. Actually, the gods who see everything and protect the good and virtuous were saving Lin Chong's life with that snowstorm. The thatched shack had collapsed under the weight of the snow.

“What am I going to do?” Lin wondered.

He put his spear and gourd down in the snow. Worried that the embers in the brazier might set the place on fire, he pulled open a section of the wall of the fallen shack, pushed himself halfway in and felt around. But the embers had been extinguished by the melted snow. Lin groped around on the bed till he found his quilt and pulled it out, emerging again into the dark night.

“I've no place to build a fire,” he pondered. “How am I going to manage?” Then he remembered the ancient temple, half a *li* down the road. “I can spend the high there,” he thought. “When daylight comes, I'll decide what to do.”

He rolled up his quilt, shouldered his spear with the wine gourd dangling from one end, closed the compound gate once more, locked it, and proceeded to the temple. Entering, he shut the door and propped against it a big stone which he had noticed lying to one side. He walked further into the temple and saw on a platform an idol of a mountain spirit with golden armor, flanked by a Nether Region judge and a small demon, one on each side. In a corner was a pile of paper. Lin Chong inspected the whole temple but could find neither occupants nor anyone in charge.

Lin placed his spear and gourd bottle on the pile of paper and untied his quilt. He removed his broad-brimmed felt hat, shook the snow from his clothes and peeled off his white tunic which was half soaked, then put it together with his hat on the altar table. He covered himself to the waist with the quilt and drank from the gourd bottle from time to time, helping the cold wine down with slices of the beef he had been carrying.

Suddenly, he heard a loud crackling outside. He leaped to his feet and peered through a vent in the wall. The fodder depot was in flames and burning fiercely. Lin grabbed his spear. He was about to open the door and dash to the fire when he heard men's voices. Lin leaned against the door and listened. The footsteps of three men came directly to the temple.

The men pushed the temple door, but the big stone held it fast and they couldn't open it. They stood under the eaves watching the fire.

“Not a bad plan, eh?” one of them said.

“We're much indebted to the warden and to you, Head Keeper,” someone replied. “When I return to the capital and report to the marshal, he undoubtedly will make you both big officials. Now Arms Instructor Zhang has no excuse to refuse.”

“We've taken care of Lin Chong properly this time,” said a third. “Young Master Gao is sure to recover.”

“We tried to arrange the match three or four times,” said a voice. “We told that lout Zhang: 'Your son-in-law is dead,' but he wouldn't give in. Young Master Gao's ailment kept getting worse. And so the marshal sent us specially to beg you two gentlemen to help. Today, we've succeeded at last.”

“I climbed over the wall and set a score of haystacks afire. I'd like to see him get away!”

“The depot is almost completely destroyed.”

“Even if he escapes with his life, burning down a military fodder depot is crime punishable by death.”

“Let's go back to the city.”

“Wait a little longer. If we bring a couple of his bones with us to the capital, the marshal and the Young Master will praise us for doing the job thoroughly.”

Lin Chong recognized them by their voices. One was the head keeper, another was Captain Lu Qian, the third was Fu An.

“Heaven took pity on me,” thought Lin. “If that thatched shack hadn't collapsed, I'd have been roasted to death by these villains!”

Softly, he pulled the stone away from the door. Clutching his spear, Lin Chong pushed the door open.

“Where do you think you're going, knaves!” he roared.

The three, who had just been leaving, froze, too shocked to move.

Lin raise his arm and speared the head keeper to the ground.

“Spare me!” cried Captain Lu, weak with terror.

Fu An had run only a score of paces when Lin Chong caught up. With one thrust, Lin plunged the spear into his back, and he also fell.

Lin turned. He saw Captain Lu starting to flee. Before Lu had gone three paces, Lin Chong shouted: “Halt, treacherous thief!” He grabbed Lu by the front of his tunic and threw him flat on his back in the snow.

Lin jabbed his spear into the ground, put one foot on Lu's chest, whipped out his dagger and held it against the captain's face.

“Filthy wretch,” he grated. “I never wronged you. How can you have injured me so? Truly, 'Killing can be forgiven, but never deception!'”

“This wasn't my idea,” Lu pleaded. “The marshal ordered me to do it! I didn't dare refuse!”

“Treacherous knave,” cried Lin. “We were friends since childhood, yet today you come to destroy me! How can you excuse yourself? Have a taste of this knife!”

He ripped open Lu's clothes, stabbed the blade into his heart and twisted. Blood spurted everywhere. Lin tore out his heart and liver.

He saw the head keeper struggling to his feet to run. Lin seized him in a flash. “Now I know what an evil scoundrel you are,” he shouted. “Take that!” He cut off the keeper's head and tied it to the end of his spear.

Next, he went back to Fu An and Lu Qian and cut off their heads too. He put away his knife, tied the three heads together by the hair, carried them into the temple and placed them on the altar in front of the mountain spirit idol. Then he put on his white tunic, tied his waist sash, clapped the broad-brimmed felt hat on his head and finished off the cold wine in the gourd bottle.

Lin tossed his quilt and the bottle aside, took up his spear, left the temple and started east. He had gone only four or five *li* when he saw people from a neighboring village hastening with water buckets and pikes to put out the blaze.

“Hurry and save the place,” Lin Chong called to them. “I'm going to report the fire to the officials!”

Spear in hand, he walked on rapidly.

The snow fell more heavily. For two watches Lin Chong walked eastward. He shivered in the relentless cold. He was now far from the fodder depot. Across the snowy spaces in a sparse grove of trees he saw a small house with a thatched roof, weighed down by a thick mantle of snow. Firelight gleamed through cracks in the wall. Lin approached the house and pushed open the door. An old vassal and four or five young ones sat huddled around an open hearth where sticks of wood were burning brightly. Lin walked over to them.

“Greetings. I'm on a mission for the garrison prison. The snow has soaked my clothes. I'd like to dry them by your fire, if I may.”

“Go ahead,” said the old vassal. “We don't mind.”

Lin toasted his damp clothes until they were somewhat drier. He noticed warming by the embers a large jug from which the fragrance of wine was rising.

“I have some small silver on me,” he said. “Could you let me have a little of that wine?”

“We take turns every night guarding the grain bins,” the old vassal said. “It's already the fourth watch, and very cold. We don't have enough wine for ourselves. How can we give you any? Forget it.”

“Only two or three bowls to ward off the chill.”

“Persistent, aren't you? I said no!”

The aroma of the wine sharpened Lin's thirst. “It can't be helped,” he insisted. “You'll have to give me some.”

The vassals all turned on him. “We're nice enough to let you dry your clothes by our fire and you want our wine,” they said. “Get out of here! If

you don't we'll tie you up!”

Lin grew angry. “Surly louts,” he cried. With the end of his spear he flicked a burning stick in the old vassal's face and, again with his spear, stirred the flames so high that they singed the old man's whiskers. Everyone jumped up in alarm. Lin belabored them with his spear. The old vassal hurriedly departed. The others were paralyzed with fright. Lin drove them out with blows of the spear shaft.

“They've all gone,” he said. “Now I can enjoy this wine!”

There were two coconut ladles on the clay platform bed. With one of these he began scooping up and drinking the brew. Soon only half remained. Lin took his spear and walked unsteadily through the door.

He staggered along for nearly a *li.* A gust of wind knocked him down beside a ravine. In vain he tried to struggle to his feet. Once a drunkard falls, he can't get up. Lin Chong lay stupefied in the snow.

The vassals, leading over twenty others armed with spears and clubs, came rushing back to the thatched house. Lin was gone. They followed his trail till they found him collapsed in the snow, his spear lying to one I side.

“So here you are,” they cried. They seized and bound him. By the fifth watch they had brought him to another place.

And because he went to this place, thousands of boats fore and aft sailed into battle on the lakes, a hundred and more heroes arrayed themselves in ranks left and right in the stronghold in the marsh.

Truly, to hear of the slaughter and tragedy freezes the heart and chills the bones!

Where exactly did the vassals take Lin Chong? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 11
Zhu Gui Shoots a Signal Arrow from the Lakeside

Pavilion
Lin Chong Climbs Mount Liangshan in the Snowy Night

The night Panther Head Lin Chong fell drunk in the snow and was unable to rise, the vassals bound him with ropes and brought him to a manor. Another vassal came out and said: “Our lord is still asleep. Let's hang him up below the entry tower.” At dawn, Lin awakened, quite sober. He looked around him. It certainly was a large manor.

“Who has dared to suspend me here?” He shouted.

Vassals grabbed sticks and came out of the gate-house. “You've got the nerve to complain!”

The old vassal whose whiskers had been singed said: “Don't bother talking to him. Just drub him! We can question him when our lord gets up.”

Swarming around Lin Chong, the vassals flailed him with their sticks. He couldn't escape. “Beat away!” he cried. “I'll make you regret this!”

Another vassal approached and said: “The lord is coming.”

Lin hazily saw an official-looking man, hands clasped behind his back, emerge from a building and descend from the porch.

“Who are you beating there?” the man called.

“We caught this rice thief last night,” the vassals replied.

The man walked over and recognized Lin Chong. He quickly ordered the vassals to desist and untied Lin's bonds.

“What are you doing tied up here, Arms Instructor?” he asked.

On hearing this, the vassals all withdrew.

Standing before Lin Chong was none other than Chai Jin. “Save me, Excellency!” Lin beseeched.

“Why have these villagers been humiliating you?”

“It's a long story.”

The two went inside and sat down. Lin recounted his adventures in detail, starting with the burning of the fodder depot.

“What bad luck you've had, brother,” said Chai Jin. “But our meeting today is Heaven-sent. You needn't worry. This place is my eastern manor. Stay a while, then we'll decide what to do.”

He ordered a vassal to bring fresh clothes and, when Lin had changed completely, invited him into a heated room and wined and dined him. Lin remained in the eastern manor for another six or seven days. Of that we'll say no more.

Let us speak rather of Cangzhou, where the warden of the garrison prison presented an accusation against Lin Chong for the murder of the head keeper, Captain Lu Qian and Fu An, and for burning down the army fodder depot. The prefect was astonished. He immediately issued an order for Lin Chong's arrest, and sent police to post pictures of him in every village and town, inn and shop, plus notices offering three thousand strings of cash for his apprehension. The hotness of the pursuit caused a stir among the local people.

Lin, in the eastern manor, was on pins and needles when he heard about it. He said to Chai Jin: “You'd better not keep me here, Excellency. They're making a house to house search. If they find me in the manor, you'll be implicated, and that's no good. Let me impose on your chivalry and generosity and borrow a little travelling money. I'll find another refuge. If I live I'll repay you with my complete devotion.”

“Since you insist on leaving, brother, I have a place to suggest. I'll give you a letter of introduction. How will that be?”

“That's very kind of you. Where is this place?”

“It's called Liangshan Marsh, in Jizhou Prefecture, Shandong Province. The area is about eight hundred *li* in circumference, and includes the Water-Girt Fortress and the Liao-er Lowlands. Three bold men have set up a stronghold there. The first is Wang Lun the White-Clad Scholar. The second is Skyscraper Du Qian. The third is Song Wan, Guardian of the Clouds. They've formed a band of seven or eight hundred and rob and pillage. Many who have committed capital crimes find shelter among them. I'm on very good terms with the three leaders. We frequently exchange letters. Suppose I write an introduction recommending that you join them?”

“Fine if that's what you think best. I'm very grateful.”

“The trouble is Cangzhou is plastered with notices for your arrest, and two army officers are checking travellers at the city gate, and that's the way you have to go.” Chai Jin lowered his head in thought. Then he looked up. “I have an idea. We'll escort you.”

“I'll never forget you kindness,” said Lin Chong.

Chai Jin sent a vassal ahead through the city gate with Lin's luggage. Then he gathered a troop of twenty or thirty horsemen, armed with bows and arrows, carrying falcons and accompanied by hunting dogs, and all gaily set forth, with Lin Chong also mounted, in their midst. The army officers at the city gate had been to Chai Jin's manor before having been appointed to this post and knew him well.

When the band of hunters arrived, they rose from their seats atop the gate-tower and called: “Out for sport, Excellency?”

Chai Jin politely dismounted. “What are you two doing here?”

“The prefect has posted notices for the arrest of the criminal Lin Chong. We've been ordered to question every traveler who passes through this gate.”

“I have Lin Chong right here in my troop,” Chai Jin said with a laugh. “Don't you recognize him?”

The army officers chuckled. “Your Excellency is very familiar with the law. You'd never willingly slip him out. Please mount.”

“You trust me that much?” Chai Jin smiled. “If we get any game, I'll present you with some on the way back.” He bid the officers farewell, got on his horse, and the troop trotted through the gate.

They rode about fifteen *li* to where the vassal was waiting. Chai Jin told Lin Chong to dismount, remove his hunter's garb and put on his own clothes, which the vassal had brought. Lin tied his sword to his waist, put on his red-tasseled felt hat, shouldered his pack, took his halberd in hand, bid Chai Jin a respectful farewell, and marched off down the road.

Chai Jin and his men mounted their horses and went hunting. Not until evening did they finally come back through the gate. They gave the officers some game and returned to the manor. Of this we'll say no more.

Lin Chong walked for over ten days. At dusk, heavy clouds gathered in the winter sky and the wind began to blow. Thick snowflakes drifted down as far as the eye could see. Lin pressed on. It was turning very cold.

Towards evening he saw in the distance beside a lake a wine shop almost completely submerged in the snow. Lin hurried towards it, raised the reed curtain and entered. He beat the snow from his clothes and looked around. There were plenty of seats. He selected a place and sat down. He leaned his halberd against the wall, removed his pack, hung up his felt hat and sword. A waiter came over.

“How much wine, sir?”

“Two measures, for a start.”

The waiter drew two measures from a cask and placed the wine on the table.

“Anything to go with the wine?” Lin asked.

“We've got raw and cooked beef, fat goose and crisp fried chicken.”

“Cut me two catties of cooked beef.”

The waiter soon returned with a platter of beef, several vegetable dishes and a large bowl into which he poured the wine. Lin finished three or four bowls. He noticed a man walk to the door and look at the snow, his hands clasped behind his back.

“Who is that fellow, drinking?” the man asked the waiter.

The man was wearing a warm hat with a long peak, a sable-lined jacket and deerskin boots. Tall, stalwart, with cheekbones like fists, he was adorned with a mustache and goatee. He continued watching the snow.

Lin Chong summoned the waiter to pour more wine. “Have a bowl with me,” he suggested. The waiter did so.

“How far is it from here to Liangshan Marsh?” queried Lin.

“Only a few *li*, but you must go by water. There's no way to get there by land. You have to take a boat.”

“Find one for me, then.”

“Where would I find a boat in this snowstorm and at this time of night?”

“I'll pay you well. Find me a boat and ferry me across.”

“There isn't any place to ask.”

“A fine state of affairs!” Lin thought to himself. He drank a few more bowls of wine. “Once I was an arms instructor in the capital,” he brooded. “I strolled and drank at will in every street and mart. Who would have thought that thief Gao Qiu would have reduced me to this condition, the mark of a criminal on my face, exiled here! I can't go home, no place is safe. How lonely I am!”

He told the waiter to bring him a brush-pen and ink. Drunk and depressed, he wrote these lines on the whitewashed wall:

Chivalrous is Lin Chong,

The loyalest of men,

Renowned among the gallant,

He'll lead heroes of the land.

By tragedy set adrift,

He's suffered many setbacks,

But when he has his way,

Mount Tai will bow before him!

Lin threw down the pen and drank. The man in the sable jacket walked up and grabbed him around the waist, exclaiming: “You've got your nerve! In Cangzhou you committed a capital crime, and here you are! Three thousand strings of cash are offered for your capture. What do you say to that?”

“Who do you think I am?”

“Aren't you Lin Chong?”

“My name is Zhang.”

The man laughed. “Rot. You wrote your name on the wall, and the golden print is on your face. You can't lie your way out of it!”

“Are you really planning to turn me in?”

Again the man laughed. “What for? Come, we'll talk in private.” He led Lin to a room in the rear overlooking the water and told the waiter to light the

lamp. Lin and he bowed to each other and sat down on opposite sides of the table.

“I heard you asking for a boat to go to Liangshan Marsh, brother,” said the man. “That's an outlaws' mountain stronghold. Why do you want to go there?”

“To be frank, the police are hot on my heels, and I've no place to hide. I've come to join the band on the mountain.”

“In that case you need an introduction.”

“I have one from a friend in Henghai County, Cangzhou Prefecture.”

“You don't mean the Small Whirlwind Chai Jin?”

“How did you know?”

“He's on very good terms with the leaders of the mountain stronghold. They write to each other often.” The man explained that when Wang Lun was on the run, he and Du Qian had been given shelter by Chai Jin. They lived in his manor for some time, and he gave them silver for travelling expenses when they left. They were very grateful.

“You are one of them and I didn't know,” Lin exclaimed. “I 'had eyes and didn't recognize Mount Taishan!' Please tell me your name.” He bowed politely.

The man returned the bow. “This humble person is the lookout for Chieftain Wang. I am called Zhu Gui. I come originally from Yishui County in Yizhou Prefecture. Among the fraternity I'm known as the Dry-Land Crocodile. In the guise of running this wine shop my job is to observe the movements of merchants and travellers. I let the stronghold know if they are carrying anything of value. When you asked about Liangshan Marsh I thought I'd better find out more about you. Then you wrote you name on the wall, and I remembered people from the capital telling of your gallantry. I never thought we'd meet here today. Since Lord Chai has written an

introduction, Chieftain Wang is sure to welcome a man of your splendid reputation.”

Zhu Gui feasted Lin with a meal of fish and meat and wine and delicacies. They ate and drank in the waterside room till half the night was gone.

“How can I find a boat to ferry me across?” Lin Chong asked.

“There are boats here, brother,” said Zhu Gui. “Don't worry about that. First get some rest. Then, please rise at the fifth watch and come here. I'll go with you .”

Both men retired to their respective rooms. Zhu Gui woke Lin at the fifth watch. They washed and rinsed their mouths, downed four or five cups of wine and ate some meat. The sky was still not yet light.

Zhu Gui opened a window of the waterside room. He fitted a whistling arrow to a magpie-decorated bow and let fly towards a creek in a thicket of reeds on the other side of a cove.

“Why have you done that?” asked Lin.

“That was a signal arrow from the mountain stronghold. A boat will come soon now.”

Not long after, from the reeds opposite a fast boat appeared, sculled by three or four men. It stopped beneath the waterside room. Lin collected his weapons and luggage and Zhu Gui conducted him to the craft. The boatmen propelled the vessel across the lake to the Shore of Golden Sands. There Lin Chong and Zhu Gui disembarked. One of the men went with them and carried Lin's things. The others took the boat back to the creek.

Zhu and Lin began climbing. Huge trees flanked the trail. Halfway up the mountain was a pavilion. A turn beyond that and they saw a large fortified pass. Before it were racks of spears and swords and bows and lances. On all sides were logs and boulders for rolling down the hill against invaders. Brigands went on ahead to announce them, then Lin and Zhu entered the pass.

They walked between two rows of pennants and battle insignia, and crossed two narrow defiles before coming to the gate of the stronghold itself. On every side were high mountains, with magnificent passes lying in between, together forming a powerful enclosure. In the center was a mirror-smooth plain, about four thousand feet in circumference. The main gate of the stronghold faced the pass. Other buildings stood in wings to left and right.

Zhu Gui led Lin Chong to Righteous Fraternity Hall. A bold fellow sat in an armchair in the middle. This was the White-Clad Scholar Wang Lun. The man in the armchair to his left was Skyscraper Du Qian. In an armchair to his right sat Song Wan, Guardian of the Clouds. The two travellers came forward and hailed the brigands respectfully, with Lin Chong standing by Zhu Gui's side.

“This is Lin Chong the Panther Head,” said Zhu Gui, “arms instructor in the capital's Mighty Imperial Guards. Because Marshal Gao decided to ruin Him, he was marked as a criminal and exiled to Cangzhou. There, the army fodder depot he was put in charge of was burned down and, in a struggle, he killed three men. He took refuge with Lord Chai, and they formed strong respect for each other. His Excellency has written a letter of introduction for him to join our company.”

Lin Chong presented his letter. Wang Lun opened and read it, and asked Lin to be seated in a fourth armchair, and Zhu Gui in a fifth. He ordered a man to bring wine, and all drank three rounds.

“Lord Chai is well, I hope?”

“He hunts and relaxes in the outskirts of the town every day.”

Wang Lun fell silent. “I'm a scholar who failed in the civil service examinations,” he thought. “In a fury I came here with Du Qian and turned bandit. Later, Song Wan joined us, and we formed this big company. I'm not particularly able, and Du Qian and Song Wan have only ordinary skill at arms. This fellow was an arms instructor in the Imperial Guards. He must be an excellent military man. If we accept him and he sees what duds we are, he'll probably want to take over, and we won't be able to stop him. I'd better just be a little rude, make some excuse and send him back down the

mountain. That will avoid any trouble. It's not very courteous to Chai Jin, in view of all his kindness, but that can't be helped."

He ordered more wine and food and laid a feast for Lin Chong. Together, all ate and drank. When they had finished, on Wang Lun's instructions one of the men brought a platter bearing fifty ounces of white silver and two bolts of fine silk and placed them before Lin. Wang Lun rose.

"Lord Chai has sent a letter recommending that you, Arms Instructor, join our humble band. But unfortunately we have little grain, our buildings are in poor condition, our forces are small. It wouldn't be right if we impeded your career. We offer these paltry gifts in the hope that you won't scorn them. Forgive us and seek a place in some big stronghold."

"Permit me to reply, three chieftains," said Lin Chong. "I have come from afar to place myself under your famed command. I seek, relying on the prestige of Lord Chai, to join your company. Though I have no talents, I hope you will accept me. I have no other desire than to pledge you my life. Nothing would make me happier. I want no silver or gifts. Please understand me."

"Our place is small. How could we give you a suitable position? Please excuse us."

Zhu Gui intervened. "Forgive me for speaking up, elder brothers," he said. "Although our stronghold is short of grain, we can obtain more from villages and towns near and far. There is plenty of wood in the mountains and by the streams, enough to build a thousand new houses if need be. This man has brought an introduction from Lord Chai. How can we tell him to go? This stronghold owes Chai a great deal. It would be very embarrassing if he heard that we refused. What's more, Lin Chong is a man of much skill. He would be a big asset to us."

Du Qian agreed. "What does it matter if we add one more?" he said. "Chai will be offended if we don't keep him. He'll think us ungrateful. We owe him so much. How can we send away a man he introduces?"

Song Wan also put in a word to Wang Lun. “For His Excellency's sake, we must let Lin Chong join as one of our stronghold's leaders. Otherwise, the whole fraternity of gallant men will despise us for our lack of chivalry.”

“But don't you realize, brothers,” Wang Lun argued, “although he's committed a capital crime in Cangzhou, we don't know much about him. What if he's come to spy on us?”

“I want to join you because I'm a condemned man,” said Lin. “Why should you suspect me?”

“Very well, then,” said Wang Lun. “Since you really wish to become one of us, you'll have to present a membership certificate.”

“I can read and write pretty well. If you'll give me paper and pen I'll write one out.”

Zhu Gui laughed. “You don't understand, Arms Instructor. We demand a membership certificate from any bold man who wants to join our band. That means you have to go down the mountain, kill a man, and bring us his head to prove yourself. That's what we call a 'membership certificate'.”

“That won't be hard. I'll go down and wait. I'm only afraid that no one will come along.”

“I give you three days,” said Wang Lun. “If you bring the membership certificate in that time, we'll accept you. If you don't, you'll have to excuse us.”

Lin Chong agreed to the chieftain's terms.

After the meeting Zhu Gui went down the mountain and returned to his wine shop. Lin Chong took his weapons and luggage and followed one of the bandits to the guest house, where he spent the night.

He rose early the next morning. After breakfast he tied on his sword, picked up his halberd and had one of the bandits lead him down the mountain. They crossed the lake in a boat and chose a secluded place beside a path to

wait for travellers. All day they waited, but by dusk not a single traveler had come their way. Lin gloomily again crossed the water with the bandit and returned to the stronghold.

“Have you got your membership certificate?” Wang Lun asked.

“No, “said Lin. “No one came today.”

“If you don't bring one tomorrow your chances of staying here are slim.”

Lin Chong didn't reply. He went unhappily to his room, had something to eat, and retired for the night.

The next day he got up as the sky was turning light, breakfasted with the bandit, took his weapons and proceeded down the trail.

“Let's try the path on the south side of the mountain today,” the bandit suggested.

They crossed the lake and waited in the forest. No one appeared until noon, when a band of over three hundred began marching by. Lin didn't dare move. He just watched them go. Hours passed and the shadows lengthened, but there were no more travellers.

“What miserable luck,” Lin said to the bandit. “Two whole days and we haven't seen a single man travelling alone. What am I going to do?”

“Don't worry, brother,” the bandit consoled him. “Tomorrow's another day. I'll take you to wait by the eastern trail.”

Again they crossed back to the stronghold.

“Your membership certificate?” asked Wang Lun.

Lin Chong could only sigh. The bandit chieftain laughed.

“So you failed again. I gave you three days. Two of them have already gone. If you don't get one tomorrow, there's no need for us to meet again. Just stroll down the mountain and find another place to stay.”

Lin returned to his room, very depressed. “Who would have thought that scoundrel Gao Qiu would have hurt me so badly,” he sighed. “I've ended up here in my wanderings, unfavored by both Heaven and Earth. What a wretched fate!”

So passed the night. He rose the following morning at daybreak, had a bite to eat, tied up his pack and put it in a corner of the room. Then he attached his sword, took his halberd, and went down the mountain with his bandit companion and ferried across to the road on the eastern side.

“If I don't get a membership certificate today, I'll have to seek another place of refuge,” said Lin.

The two concealed themselves in a grove beside the eastern path. No one had come by the time the sun was directly overhead. The last remnants of snow clouds had been swept away and the sky was a brilliant blue.

“It seems I'm out of luck again,” said Lin. “I might as well go back while it's still early, pick up my luggage and start looking for another place.”

“Over there!” the bandit said softly, pointing. “Someone's coming!”

“At last!” Lin exclaimed.

He saw a man walking towards them in the distance along the foot of the mountain. When he came close, Lin leaped out with a flourish of his halberd. *“Aiya!”* exclaimed the man. He cast down his laden carrying-pole, turned and fled. Lin gave chase, but the fellow was much too fast. He quickly vanished behind a rise.

“Did you ever see such luck!” Lin fumed. “Three days I wait, and when one finally comes, I let him get away!”

“Although you didn't kill anyone, that stuff he's left here ought to earn you some more time,” said the bandit.

“Take it up the mountain. I'll wait here a bit longer.”

Not long after the bandit had departed with the carrying-pole and its load, Lin saw a big fellow coming round the bend. “Heaven is merciful,” he murmured. The man carried a halberd, and he was in a raging fury.

“Filthy rogues,” he bellowed. “Where have you taken my luggage? Wait till I catch you varlets! I'll teach you to tweak the tiger's whiskers!”

In great bounds he came flying down the trail. Lin Chong strode forward to meet him.

Because this man battled Lin Chong, a wind-stirring white-browed tiger was added to Liangshan Marsh, and several golden-eyed chasm-leaping wild beasts joined the water-girt stronghold.

Who was the man Lin fought? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 12
Lin Chong Joins the Bandits in Liangshan Marsh
Yang Zhi Sells His Sword in the Eastern Capital

Lin Chong saw that the man wore a broad-brimmed felt hat from Fanyang with a red tassel on top, a white silk tunic bound at the waist by a broad band of vertical stitches, leggings of alternate strips of black and white, deerskin socks, and short hairy cowhide boots. A sword at his waist, a halberd in his hand, he was tall and had a large blue birthmark on his face and sparse reddish whiskers. The felt hat was pushed far back on his shoulders, his chest was exposed, a knotted bandanna covered his head.

Halberd in hand he shouted: “You dirty robber! Where have you taken my luggage and valuables?”

Lin Chong irately refused to answer. Eyes glaring, mustache bristling, he rushed forward, grasping his halberd, to give battle. The snow clouds were gone, the sky had cleared. Thin ice coated the edges of the stream. On the bank the two attacked each other with murderous fury. They fought for thirty rounds, with neither being the gainer, then hacked away for another dozen. Just as the struggle was reaching its climax, high on the mountain a voice rang out: “Stop fighting, brave fellows!”

Lin Chong leaped from the combat circle, and he and his opponent stayed their hands. Down the mountain came the White-Clad Scholar Wang Lun, accompanied by Du Qian, Song Wan and many of the bandits. At the foot of the slope they got into boats and crossed the lake.

“Beautiful technique, both of you,” Wang Lun commended. “This is our brother Lin Chong, known as Panther Head. And you, sir, with the blue face? Would you tell us your name?”

“I'm called Yang Zhi. I am descended from three generations of generals, the grandson of Duke Yang Linggong. Yet here I am, wandering around Guanxi. When I was younger, I passed the military examination, and was appointed an aide in the palace. When Longevity Hill was being built, the Taoist Emperor sent ten of us aides to Lake Taihu to collect grotesque rock formations and colored stones and bring them back to the capital to decorate the hill.

“I never knew my luck was so bad. On the return trip, when we were crossing the Yellow River, my boat capsized and the rocks I was transporting were sunk. I didn't dare report back to the capital, and I ran away. Recently, I heard that I was pardoned, and I was on my way to the Eastern Capital with money and valuables. I intended to spend some in the Council of Military Affairs to see whether I could arrange another position for myself. The peasant I hired was carrying them on a shoulder-pole when your men snatched them away. I hope you'll return them to me.”

“Aren't you also called the Blue-Faced Beast?” asked Wang Lun.

“That is correct.”

“So that's who you are! We'd be very pleased if you came to our stronghold for a few cups of wine. We'll return your belongings there. What do you say?”

“Since you know me, why not just return my luggage? That'll be just as good as inviting me to drink.”

“I was in the Eastern Capital a few years ago, sitting for an examination, and I heard of your fame. Today, I've been fortunate enough to meet you. How can I let you leave empty-handed? Please rest a while in our stronghold. That's all I ask.”

Yang Zhi went with Wang Lun and the others across the lake and climbed to the fortress on the top of the mountain. Zhu Gui was also summoned to come up the mountain and meet him, and all gathered in Righteous Fraternity Hall. On the left, in four armchairs, sat Wang Lun, Du Qian, Song Wan and Zhu Gui. There were two armchairs on the right, the first for Yang Zhi, the second for Lin Chong. When all were seated, Wang Lun ordered a feast of mutton and wine in Yang Zhi's honor. Of that we need say no more.

To dispense with idle chatter, when the assembled diners had drunk several cups, Wang Lun said to himself: “If we keep only Lin Chong here, it won't be to our advantage. Why not put on a show of kindness and keep Yang Zhi as well? Then we can play one off against the other.”

He pointed at Lin and said to Yang: “This brother was an arms instructor in the Mighty Imperial Guards in the Eastern Capital. He's known as Panther Head Lin Chong. Marshal Gao can't abide good people. He framed Lin Chong, had him tattooed with the mark of a criminal and exiled him to Cangzhou. There, Lin ran into trouble again. He, too, has just come here. I don't want to detain you if you're set on going to the capital to try and get yourself a new position. I myself found I had no choice but to give up civil affairs and become an outlaw here in the hills. You have committed a crime. Although you're been pardoned, you'll never attain your former rank, especially since that rogue Gao Qiu now holds military authority. Do you think he'll forgive you? You'd do better to stay on in our small stronghold, sharing our loot and wine and meat, and be an outlaw like the rest of us. How does that strike you?”

“It's very considerate of you leaders. But I have a relative in the Eastern Capital who was implicated in my case, and I haven't thanked him yet for his help. I still think I'd better go. I hope you'll return my luggage. If you won't, I'll just have to leave without it.”

Wang Lun laughed. “Of course we won't force you, if you don't want to remain. Please set your mind at ease. Spend the night. You can go tomorrow morning.”

Yang Zhi was very pleased. They drank late into the second watch, then all retired. The next morning, farewell toasts were drunk to Yang Zhi. After breakfast the chieftains directed a bandit to carry Yang's belongings. They went with him down the mountain as far as the beginning of the trail and bid him farewell. The bandit ferried him across the lake and took him to the road. Yang departed and the outlaws returned to the stronghold.

Only then did Wang Lun agree to let Lin Chong occupy the fourth armchair, and Zhu Gui the fifth. From then on, these five bold fellows of Liangshan Marsh pillaged and plundered together. Of that we'll say no more.

Yang Zhi set out down the road. He found a peasant to carry his luggage, and told the bandit to go back. After a number of days, Yang Zhi arrived in the Eastern Capital. He took quarters in an inn, paid off the peasant, removed his weapons, and ordered food and drink. A few days later, he sent someone to the Council of Military Affairs with money and gifts to try, by dispensing largesse high and low, to get himself reinstated as palace aide. It cost him a lot, but finally he was granted an interviews with Marshal Gao.

Gao read all the documents concerning his case. “Ten of you aides were sent to transport grotesque rock. Nine delivered their cargo. Only you, you clod, lost yours,” the marshal said angrily. “You didn't even report back. Instead you ran away. We couldn't get our hands on you for a long time. Now you want a job again? You may have been pardoned, but you still have a criminal record. We can't use you!” He scrawled a refusal on Yang's application, and had him expelled from the Imperial Guards headquarters.

Dejectedly, Yang returned to the inn. “Wang Lun was right,” he thought. “It's just that I didn't want to sully the family name. I hoped for a chance to distinguish myself with spear and sword in a border post, to win honors for my wife and opportunities for my sons, and reflect glory on my ancestors. I never expected to get such a rebuff! Poisonous cruel Marshal Gao!”

Yang was quite depressed. A few more days at the inn and his money was gone. “What am I going to do?” Yang fretted. “I'll have to sell the ancestral sword which has never left my side. There is no other way out. I should be able to get a couple of thousand for it. That will keep me in expense money till I find a place for myself.”

The same day he tied a few strands of grass to the sword, showing that it was for sale, and took it to the market-place. But though he stood all morning on Horse Fair Avenue, no one asked about the sword. Around noon he went to the busy Tianhanzhou Bridge area to try his luck there.

He hadn't been waiting long when people on both sides of the square suddenly began running away and hiding in lanes near the river. “Hide, quickly!” they yelled, as they fled in panic. “The tiger is coming!”

“Nonsense,” said Yang. “What would a tiger be doing in the middle of a prosperous city?” He remained where he was. Then he saw a hulking swarthy fellow staggering half-drunk in his direction. He recognized the notorious rowdy Niu Er, known throughout the city as the Hairless Tiger. A trouble-making, rioting bully, he had been arrested several times, but Kaifeng Prefecture seemed unable to control him. Whenever he appeared, everybody got out of his way.

Now he lumbered up to Yang and took the sword from his hand. “How much do you want for this?”

“Three thousand strings of cash for a precious ancestral blade.”

“All that money for this shitty thing! For thirty coppers I can buy a knife that will slice meat and cut bean-curd. What's so good about your sword? What's precious about if?”

“This isn't one of those iron blades they sell in the shops. This is a rare weapon.”

“How so?”

“First,” it can cut copper and pierce iron without curling the edge. Second, it can slice a tuft of hair blown against it. Third, it can kill a man and come away clean.”

“Would you really dare cut copper coins?”

“Bring them out and I'll show you.”

Niu Er went to a pepper shop near the bridge and returned with twenty three-cent pieces. He piled these on the bridge railing and said to Yang: “If you can cut through these, man, I'll give you three thousand strings of cash.”

Though people were afraid to come close, many of them watched from a distance.

“Nothing to it,” said Yang. He rolled up his sleeves, grasped the sword fi and took aim. With one downward chop he cleaved the pile of coins neatly in two. The watchers set up a cheer.

“Quit that bloody racket!” growled Niu Er. “What did you say the second thing was?” he asked Yang.

“Take a tuft of hair and just blow it against the blade. It will cut right through it.”

“I don't believe you!” The bully pulled a few hairs from his head and handed them to Yang. “Go on, blow, I want to see.”

Yang held the hairs in his left hand and blew them with one hard puff against the sword edge. Two halves of the tuft floated to the ground. A loud cheer broke from the crowd. More and more people were gathering.

“What was the third thing?” Niu Er asked.

“Kill a man without staining the blade.”

“How can you do that?”

“When you hack a man with this sword there's not a drop of blood on it. That's how sharp it is.”

“I don't believe it! Kill a man and show me.”

“Here, in the imperial city? Who would dare? I'll kill a dog for you instead.”

“You said a man, not a dog!”

“If you don't want the sword, forget it. Quit pestering me.”

“Let me see it!”

“Haven't you anything better to do? Don't provoke me.”

“Kill me, if you dare!”

“You're never wronged me, we're not enemies. I've proven my claim twice. Why should I kill you?”

Niu Er grasped Yang Zhi's arm. “You must sell me that sword!”

“If you want to buy it, where's your money?”

“I don't have any!”

“What are you holding me for, then?”

“I want that sword!”

“You can't have it!”

“Stab me, if you're so brave!”

Yang angrily pushed him away. Niu Er fell to the ground. He clambered to his feet and butted Yang in the chest.

“Neighbors, you're my witness,” Yang shouted. “I'm selling my sword because I need money. This knave is trying to snatch it away, and now he's struck me!”

But the watchers were all afraid of Niu Er. No one dared come forward to make peace.

“So I struck you,” cried Niu Er. “Suppose I beat you to death? What of if!” He swung his right fist in a wild punch. Yang dodged and chopped a furious blow at Niu Er's forehead. The scoundrel collapsed. Yang closed in and finished him with two thrusts in the chest. Blood gushed copiously, and Niu Er lay dead.

“I've killed the wretch,” Yang exclaimed. “I don't want to implicate you, but the man is dead. Please come with me to the authorities and be my witness.”

The neighbors quickly rallied round and accompanied Yang to the Kaifeng prefectural office. They all presented themselves and knelt where the prefect was holding court. Yang laid the sword before him.

“I was formerly an aide in the palace, but because I lost a cargo of grotesque and colored stones, I was dismissed. Now, I have no money, and I took my sword on the street to sell it. The rascal Niu Er grabbed for it and started to punch me. I killed him in a moment of rage. These neighbors all saw what happened.”

Many spoke on his behalf.

“Since he has come forward voluntarily,” said the prefect, “let him be spared the preliminary beating.” He ordered that a long wooden rack be fitted around Yang Zhi's neck, and that two inspectors and a forensic expert take Yang and his witnesses back to the Tianhanzhou Bridge for an examination at the scene of the crime. The prefect drew the appropriate documents.

After the witnesses submitted formal statements in writing they were released under guarantees to produce themselves whenever the court

summoned. Yang Zhi was locked up in the jail for condemned prisoners.

The guards and keepers were sympathetic when they heard that he had killed Niu Er the Hairless Tiger. They didn't demand money from him and treated him well. People who lived near the bridge said he had rid them of a scourge. All chipped in and raised some silver. They had Yang Zhi's meals sent in and dispensed money gifts among his jailers high and low.

The prosecutor considered him a good man who had removed a nuisance from the streets of the capital and had confessed of his own volition. No one had petitioned for justice for Niu Er. And so the charges against Yang were made much milder. He was interrogated a number of times, and finally convicted of “involuntary manslaughter during a fight.”

He served a term of sixty days. Then, on the recommendation of the prosecutor, he was brought before the prefect, who ordered that the rack be removed, and that Yang be given twenty strokes and tattooed with the “golden print” of the criminal, and be exiled to the garrison in Darning, the Northern Capital. The sword was impounded by the court.

Documents were drawn and two escorts appointed. Who should they be but Zhang Long and Zhao Hu. A seven-and-a-half-catty rack was fastened around Yang Zhi's neck, final instructions given to the escorts, and the three set out.

When they neared the Tianhanzhou Bridge several of the larger shopkeepers, who had raised a special fund, invited them to a tavern for food and wine, and gave the escorts some silver. “Yang Zhi is a good man who's rid the people of a menace,” they said. “Please take good care of him on the road to the Northern Capital.”

“We know that without you telling us,” said the guards. “Don't worry.”

Yang thanked his hosts, who gave him the rest of the silver for his travelling expenses, and all went their separate ways.

The former palace aide returned to the inn where he had been living, paid his food and rent bill, collected his clothing and luggage, and treated his

escorts to food and wine. He had a doctor apply salve to the wounds from his beating, then took to the road with his guards.

They travelled towards the Northern Capital, a single marker every five *li*, a double marker every ten. In the big county and prefectural towns, Yang bought food and drink for Zhang Long and Zhao Hu. They spent the nights in hostels, walking again at the break of day. Before long they reached the Northern Capital, and put up at an inn.

The governor of Darning, the Northern Capital, had jurisdiction over both military and civilian affairs. He was very powerful. His name was Liang Zhongshu, and he was the son-in-law of Cai Jing, the Premier in the Eastern Capital. That day was the ninth of the second lunar month, and Liang was holding court. The two escorts entered with Yang Zhi and presented the documents from Kaifeng Prefecture. Liang read them. He had met Yang in the Eastern Capital. Now he questioned him closely, and Yang related how Marshal Gao had refused to reinstate him, how he tried to sell his sword when his money was gone, and his killing of Niu Er. Liang ordered his attendants to remove the rack, and said he would keep Yang Zhi in his service. He issued a receipt for the prisoner and sent the two escorts back to the Eastern Capital. Of them we'll say no more.

Yang attended Governor Liang in his mansion from morning till night. Liang was impressed with his diligence. He wanted to make him a lieutenant and give him a regular monthly wage. But he thought the other army men would be against it. So he ordered that a military tourney be held among all junior and senior officers at the training field outside the East Gate.

That night Liang summoned Yang to him and said: “I'm thinking of making you a lieutenant with a fixed salary. How good are you with weapons?”

“I attained my original position by passing arms tests. In the palace I was a military aide. I'm familiar with all eighteen forms of the fighting arts. The news that Your Excellency is willing to raise me dispels the dark clouds and lets the sunlight through. If I can make the slightest advance, I shall serve you with the devotion of a horse that is saddled and bridled!”

Liang was delighted. He presented Yang with a set of armor. That night nothing more transpired.

The next morning there was a gentle breeze and the sun was warm. It was the middle of the second lunar month. After breakfast, Liang took Yang with him and they mounted. Escorted by troops front and rear, they proceeded through the East Gate. On the training field, officers and men and many officials were arrayed to greet the governor's arrival. Liang got off his horse at the reviewing pavilion, and took his seat on a silver filagreed chair. Military officers stood to the left and right of him in two rows. Fierce-looking commanders watched from front and rear, and on all sides. On a central platform were two famous generals; Li Cheng, known as the King of the Skies, and Wen Da, known as the Mighty Sword. Either could single-handed defeat ten thousand of the foe, and they commanded great hosts of men and horses. Now both came forward and hailed Liang respectfully.

A yellow flag rose over the generals' platform, and on either side fifty golden drums boomed in thunderous cadence. Three fanfares on the trumpets were followed by three flourishes on the thunder drums. An absolute silence fell on the training field. Over the generals' stand rose a plain white flag. Five companies quickly massed before it in formation. Then above the generals' platform a red signal flag fluttered in the wind. Again the thundering drums rolled, and the five companies broke into two battle formations, weapons at the ready.

The white flag waved. Two lines of cavalry trotted neatly to the fore and reined in their horses.

Liang sent down an order for Lieutenant Zhou Jin to present himself. Lieutenant Zhou, in the right formation, spurred his horse and cantered to the pavilion. He jumped from his mount, stabbed his lance into the ground, and hailed the governor in a ringing voice.

“Let the lieutenant display his military skill,” Liang directed.

Zhou grasped his lance and vaulted back into the saddle. He put his horse through its paces in front of the reviewing stand, wheeling left and right

while performing several figures with his lance. The watchers shouted their approval.

“Call Yang Zhi, the military stalwart who was transferred here from the Eastern Capital,” said Liang.

Yang circled to the front of the pavilion and hailed the governor.

“I know that you formerly were a military aide in the palace in the Eastern Capital, and were exiled here for committing a crime,” said Liang. “Today robbers and bandits rampage freely. Our country needs strong men. Dare you joust with Zhou Jin? If you can defeat him, I'll give you his position.”

“Since Your Excellency is so benevolent, I cannot refuse.”

Liang directed that Yang be given a battle charger, and that the armorer supply him with weapons. Then he ordered Yang Zhi to don his armor, mount and vie with Zhou Jin.

Yang went to the rear of the pavilion and put on the armor he had been given the night before, buckled it tight, set a helmet on his head, took bow and arrows, sword and lance, mounted his horse and cantered out.

Liang called: “Let Yang Zhi and Zhou Jin first vie with lances.”

“How dare he cross lances with me,” Zhou Jin said angrily. “An exiled criminal!”

Little did he know how his words infuriated Yang, who came to do him battle.

In this tourney Yang Zhi won top honors and became tamed throughout the army. But who was the person this contest caused to appear? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 13
The Blue-Faced Beast Battles in the Northern Capital

Urgent Vanguard Vies for Honors on the Training Field

Zhou Jin and Yang Zhi sat their chargers beneath the pennants, ready to enter the field and joust with lances.

“Wait!” shouted General Wen Da. He crossed to the pavilion and addressed himself to Governor Liang. “Although we don't know which of these two is more skilled, Your Honor,” he said, “the point of a lance is merciless, meant only for destroying robbers and brigands. These are men of our own army, and they may be hurt. A slight wound can cripple, a heavy wound can kill. It would have a bad effect on our forces. I suggest that the lance tips be removed and the ends bound in felt and dabbed in lime. Let each of the mounted men wear black tunics when they fight. The man with the most white spots loses.”

“An excellent idea,” said Liang. He issued an appropriate order. The two contestants went to the rear of the pavilion, where the points of their lances were taken off. The ends were wrapped so thickly that they became knobs of felt. Each then donned a black tunic, dabbed his lance-head in a bucket of lime, mounted, and rode out onto the field.

Lance erect, Zhou Jin kicked his horse and cantered towards Yang Zhi. The former military aide slapped his mount and advanced to give battle, twirling his weapon. Back and forth they clashed, to and fro, wheeling, circling, man against man, horse against horse. They fought forty or fifty rounds. Zhou Jin was dappled white, as if spattered with bean-curd in nearly fifty places. Yang had only one white spot, over his left shoulder blade.

Liang was delighted. He shouted for Zhou Jin to mount the pavilion. “My predecessor made you a lieutenant,” he said. “But after seeing the way you fight I don't consider you fit to lead troops into battle— and as a lieutenant, no less! Let Yang Zhi take this man's place!”

General Li Cheng entered the pavilion. “Zhou Jin isn't very good with lances,” he admitted, “but he's a fine mounted archer. It wouldn't be right to demote him. You'd only affect morale. Why not let him and Yang Zhi contend with bows and arrows?”

The governor nodded. “Well said.” He issued the order.

Zhou and Yang stabbed their lances into the ground and were given bows and arrows. Yang took his bow from its sheath, strung it, jumped on his horse, cantered up to the pavilion, and reined in. He rose in his stirrups and bowed.

“Excellency, an arrow in flight knows no mercy. It can cause a grievous wound. Please issue your instructions.”

“When warriors fight, who thinks of wounds? Even if death results, there will be no consequences.”

Yang returned to the battle arena. On Li Cheng's directions each contestant was issued a shield which he attached to his arm.

“You shoot three arrows at me, first,” Yang proposed. “Then I'll shoot three at you.”

Zhou Jin wanted nothing more than to put an arrow through him. But Yang, an experienced army officer, was sure he could deal with his tricks, and was not perturbed.

A blue flag waved over the generals' platform. Yang slapped his horse and cantered south. Zhou raced after him. He tied his reins to the pommel, grasped the bow in his left hand and fitted an arrow with his right. Zhou stretched the bow to its utmost and let fly at Yang's back. The instant he heard the twang, Yang ducked down well over his stirrups, and the arrow sailed harmlessly past.

Flurried, Zhou hastily drew a second arrow from the quiver, fitted it to the bow, aimed, and sent it winging towards the back of his rival. This time Yang didn't dodge, but merely tapped the speeding arrow with the end of his bow and knocked it clattering to the sward.

Zhou was frantic. By then Yang had reached the end of the field. He spun his mount around and came galloping back in the direction of the pavilion. Zhou checked his horse quickly, turned and gave chase. Eight racing hoofs,

like smashing plates and crashing gongs, churned up the green turf with the fury of a typhoon. Zhou set a third arrow to his bowstring. With all his might he pulled the weapon to the full, his eyes glaring at the center of Yang's back, and again let fly.

Yang turned at the sound and snatched the arrow in mid-air. Then he trotted up to the pavilion and tossed Zhou's arrow to the ground.

Governor Liang was entranced. He ordered Yang to shoot three arrows at Zhou. Again the blue flag waved. Zhou cast his bow and arrows aside, grasped the shield firmly in his hand and rode south. Yang straightened up in the saddle, clapped his mount with his heels and drummed after.

First, he sprang an empty bowstring. Hearing the sound behind him, Zhou twisted around and raised his shield. But there was nothing.

“That rogue is good with lances but he can't shoot,” thought Zhou. “I'll wait till he makes his second false shot and demand that he forfeit the match. I'll be proclaimed the winner.”

Zhou's mount by then had reached the far southern end of the field. It turned and started back towards the pavilion. Yang's horse followed, while Yang drew an arrow from his quiver and fitted it to the bow.

“If I hit him in the middle of the back. I'll kill him,” he mused. “He's not my enemy. I'll tag him in a spot that's not fatal.”

His left arm extended as if holding up Mount Taishan, his right arm bent as if cradling a baby, Yang stretched the bow and string into a full moon. Quicker than it takes to say, the arrow streaked like a comet into Zhou's left shoulder. He tumbled to the ground. His horse galloped behind the pavilion. Officers and men hurried forward to help him.

Liang was very pleased. He ordered that a warrant immediately be issued giving Yang Zhi the position held by Zhou Lin. Overjoyed, Yang dismounted and presented himself in the pavilion to express his thanks and receive his appointment. But a man on the left side of the stairs suddenly came up and intervened.

“Not so fast!” he exclaimed. “You'll have to joust with me, first!”

Yang looked at him. He was a towering fellow with a round face, large ears, a big, thick-lipped mouth, bristling side-whiskers and an imposing bearing.

The man strode up to the governor and hailed him respectfully. “Zhou Jin has been ill and hasn't fully recovered his spirits. That's why he lost to Yang Zhi,” he explained. “Though I'm not very talented I'd like to pit my skill against Yang's. If he can gain the slightest advantage of me, never mind about Zhou Jin's position, I'll yield him mine, with never a word of complaint till the end of my days!”

Liang saw that it was none other than Suo Chao, a captain in the guards regiment of Darning Prefecture. Suo's temper was as explosive as a pinch of salt in the flames, and he was eager to win glory for his country, always plunging first into the fray. And so he was known as the Urgent Vanguard.

Li Cheng came down from the generals' platform and presented himself before the pavilion. “Yang Zhi was a military aide in the palace, Excellency,” he said. “Naturally, he is skilled with weapons. We should have known Zhou Jin is no match for him. Now, with Captain Suo there can be a real contest.”

Liang thought to himself: “I want to raise Yang Zhi in rank but my officers are against it. If he can defeat Suo Chao they'll have nothing more to say. It will silence them for good.”

He summoned Yang before him. “Will you joust with Suo Chao?”

“I could not refuse, since that is Your Excellency's wish.”

“Good. Change your gear behind the pavilion. Tie your armor on well.” He instructed the armorer to provide suitable weapons, and added: “Let him use my battle charger.” To Yang Zhi said: “Be careful. This is no ordinary match.”

Yang thanked him, and went to change his equipment.

Li Cheng gave his instructions to Suo Chao. “You're in a special position,” he said. “Zhou Jin was your protege. He lost. If that should happen to you, it would be a reflection on the entire Darning officer corps. I'm lending you an experienced battle charger and a set of armor. Be careful. Let nothing tarnish your valor.”

Suo Chao thanked him, and went to get ready.

Liang rose and walked out to the stairs. Attendants brought his silver filagreed armchair and placed it before the moon terrace railing. Liang sat down. Officers stood respectfully in lines to his left and right. They directed that the three-tiered parasol of tea-colored silk topped by a golden gourd be opened behind him.

At a signal from the generals' platform a red flag waved, golden drums on either side thundered, and cannon boomed from each of the two formations upon the field. Suo Chao galloped out and waited behind the pennant-bedecked gate. Yang Zhi also emerged from on of the formations and rode swiftly to the rear of the gate, where he reined in.

Now, a yellow flag fluttered over the generals' stand, and the drums again thundered. Both formations raised a mighty shout. Then a hush fell on the field as gongs sounded and a pure white flag was broken out. None of the watchers breathed a sound. They stood in absolute silence.

Above the generals' stand a blue flag rose. For the third time the war-drums sounded. The pennanted gate of the left formation swung open. Bells tinkled, and Captain Suo Chao entered the arena and checked his horse. Weapons in hand, he was a heroic figure! On his head was a lion helmet of pure steel, with a long red tassel dangling behind. He wore a coat of iron mail, bound at the waist by a gold-plated girdle with an animal's face. Plates of bronze protected his chest and back. Overall was a pink cape with circular designs, fastened at the neck by cords of green wool. His feet were shod in open lattice-strip leather boots. A bow hanging from his left shoulder, a quiver of arrows hanging from his right, he held a golden axe at the level in his right hand as he sat astride General Li's battle-tested pure white charger.

Then the gate of the right formation opened. Bells rang, and Yang Zhi, lance in hand, rode forth. In the combat area he checked his mount and levelled his lance. A bold warrior! The helmet of steel on his head gleamed like frost in the sunlight, trailing behind it a blue tassel. Yang wore chain mail of petal and leaf pattern. A woolen sash held the garment in place. Animal-face plates, front and back, gave added protection. Over his shoulders a white floral-designed cape was draped. Purple wool cords tied it at his neck. On his feet were thick-soled brown leather boots. A leather-handled bow and a quiver of arrows with wedge-shaped heads hung from his shoulders. In his hand was a steel-inlaid lance of pure iron. He rode Governor Liang's flame-colored charger, a horse as swift as the wind.

The officers on both sides murmured their admiration. Although their skill had yet to be displayed, the two presented a striking picture. A flag officer, riding due south and bearing a gold-spangled banner with the word “Order,” cantered up and said: “An order from His Excellency. He wants you each to do his best. Any slackness will be punished. The winner will be handsomely rewarded.”

The two combatants galloped to the center of the field and turned to face each other, weapons raised. Suo Chao charged Yang Zhi furiously, swinging his axe. Yang, equally militant, twisting his lance, pressed forward to meet him. They clashed in the center of the field before the generals' stand. Each exerted his utmost skill. Back and forth, to and fro, four arms flailing, eight hoofs flying, the battle raged for more than fifty rounds with no sign of a winner.

Liang watched from the moon terrace in a daze. The officers on either side of him cheered without cease. On the grounds soldiers marvelled to one another. “We've been in the army for years and have been in many battles, but never have we seen warriors like these!”

Li Cheng and Wen Da, on the generals' stand, kept yelling: “Well done!”

Wen Da was worried that one of them would be wounded. He instructed the flag officer to ride out with his “Order” banner and separate them. Gongs suddenly sounded on the generals' stand. But Yang and Suo were both eager to win glory. Neither would desist.

The flag officer galloped up, shouting: “Stop, good warriors! His Excellency wants to issue an order!”

Only then did the two contestants lower their weapons and subside on their mounts. They cantered back to their original starting points and halted by their respective pennanted gates, facing Governor Liang, awaiting his command.

Li Cheng and Wen Da came down from the generals' stand and proceeded to the moon terrace. “Excellency,” they said to Liang, “such skill as those two display should be made full use of!”

Very pleased, Liang directed that the combatants be summoned. The flag officer transmitted the order and Yang and Suo rode up to the pavilion and dismounted. A soldier relieved them of their weapons. They entered the pavilion and bowed.

Liang presented each with a silver ingot and a set of fine clothes, and bestowed on them the rank of major. He directed that commission documents be drawn, as of that day.

Suo and Yang bowed and expressed their thanks. They left the pavilion, bearing their gifts, removed their combat equipment and changed their clothes. They then returned to the pavilion and thanked the assembled officers. Liang ordered the two to pay respects to each other and join the majors.

The massed soldiers withdrew, banners waving, preceded by the golden drums, beating out the victory roll. Liang, in the company of his senior and junior officers, remained in the pavilion for a feast.

When the sun was sinking in the west, the dining ended. Liang mounted his horse and started back to his residence escorted by his officers. In the van, side by side, rode the two new majors, their heads garlanded with red flowers.

The street was lined with joyous crowds, young and old, as the entourage entered the city's East Gate. “What are you so merry about?” Liang

demanded, from his horse. “Are you presuming to laugh at me?”

Several old men knelt and replied: “We were born and raised in Darning, the Northern Capital, but in all our years we never saw such jousting! We were out at the field, watching those two bold fellows. Who wouldn't be happy to see such skill!”

Liang was very pleased. He returned to his residence. His officers went their respective ways. Suo Chao's friends gave a drinking party to celebrate his appointment. Yang Zhi, a new-comer, didn't know anybody, and retired, alone, to his quarters. From then on, he served Liang diligently. Of that we need say no more.

We'll dispense with idle chatter and come to the point. Liang became very fond of Yang Zhi after the tourney at the training field outside the East Gate, and they were together every day. Yang received an additional monthly stipend. Gradually, he developed friends. Suo Chao respected him for his ability and strength.

Time fleeted by. It was the end of spring and the approach of summer, the fifth day of the fifth lunar month, a festival day. Liang and his wife, Lady Cai, were celebrating it at a family dinner in the rear salon. After several toasts and two courses, Lady Cai asked a question.

“Today Your Excellency is a commander-in-chief and holds an important post in the government. Where does this honor and high rank come from?”

“Since childhood I have always studied. I've learned history and the classics,” Liang replied. “But I'm a man of feeling. Of course I know how much I owe your noble father in the Eastern Capital. I can never thank him enough for his help.”

“That being so, how could you forget his birthday?”

“I remember it perfectly. It's the fifteenth of the sixth lunar month. I've already sent out stewards with one hundred thousand strings of cash to buy ornaments of gold and precious stones to present as birthday gifts. They've

been gone a month and have bought up nine-tenths of what I want. When everything is ready, I'll have the gifts delivered."

"Only one thing is troubling me. Last year, the trinkets and gold ornaments and jewels which I dispatched as gifts were snatched by robbers on the road. All those valuables gone, and we still haven't caught the bandits! Who should I choose to deliver them this time?"

"You have plenty of officers at your disposal. Just pick a man you can trust."

"We have another forty or fifty days yet. There'll be time enough for that when I've got all our gifts ready. Don't worry, madam. I'll know what to do."

Their feasting continued from midday till the second watch. Then all withdrew. Of that we'll say no more.

A new magistrate was appointed to Yuncheng, a county seat in Jizhou Prefecture in the province of Shandong. His family name was Shi, his given name was Wenbin. Officers sat to the left and right one day when he was holding court, and he called before him the sheriff and his two constables. One known as the "infantry constable," the other the "cavalry constable." The first commanded twenty pikemen and twenty foot soldiers. Under the second were twenty mounted archers and twenty foot soldiers.

Zhu Tong, the cavalry constable, was very tall, with a long luxuriant beard. His face was brown as a chestnut, his eyes bright as stars, like Guan Gong of old. Known throughout the county as Beautiful Beard, he came from a wealthy family. He was a chivalrous, generous man and had many friends among the gallant fraternity. He was also well skilled in the use of weapons.

The infantry constable was called Lei Heng. A tall man with a ruddy complexion and a fan beard fringing his face, he was extremely strong and agile. In a running jump he could clear a chasm twenty to thirty feet wide, and was known as Winged Tiger. Originally a blacksmith, he later opened a

grain mill, a slaughter-house for cattle, and a gambling den. Although chivalrous, he was also rather narrow-hearted. But he, too, was proficient in arms.

Their main job was catching robbers. When the magistrate summoned them, they hailed him respectfully and awaited his orders.

“Since taking office,” he said, “I have learned that bandits in Liangshan Marsh—which is in the watery region under our jurisdiction as part of Jizhou Prefecture—have been pillaging the land and fighting our soldiers. They rampage in every hamlet and village, and are quite a large force. I've called you two because I want you, without fear of hardship, to take some men and go out, one group through the West Gate and one through the East, and patrol. Arrest all the robbers and bring them in, but don't disturb the villagers. On a hilltop past the village of East Bank is a big red-leafed tree. It's the only one around. Each of you must bring back a few of those leaves to prove you have patrolled that far. If you don't, I'll know you are lying and will punish you severely.”

The constables returned to their stations, mustered their men, and set forth.

Lei Heng marched through the East Gate with twenty foot soldiers. They searched several villages and the surrounding countryside, and finally came to the hill beyond East Bank. They picked some of the red leaves and started back for the village. Before they had gone more than two or three *li*, they noticed that the door of the Lingguan Temple, which they we're passing, was open.

“The temple has no custodian, but the door isn't shut,” said Lei Heng. “Could there be some bad person inside? We'd better take a look.”

He and his men lit torches and went in. There, lying on the altar table was a big fellow, stark naked and fast asleep. The weather was hot, and he had peeled off his tattered garments and rolled them up to serve as a pillow beneath his head. He was snoring peacefully.

“Remarkable!” said Lei Heng. “Our magistrate must be psychic! Here's a robber in East Bank, sure enough!” He shouted an order.

The twenty soldiers all piled on. Although the big fellow fought strenuously, they soon had his hands trussed behind him. They pulled him out of the temple and marched him to the manor of the ward chief.

And because they took him there, three or four heroes met in East Bank Village, and treasures worth a hundred thousand strings of cash were sought in Yuncheng County. Truly, heavenly spirits from the sky gathered and earthly fiends among men convened. Where did Lei Heng escort that fellow they had nabbed? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 14
Red-Haired Demon Lies Drunk in Lingguan Temple
Chao the Heavenly King Acknowledges a "Nephew" in East Bank Village

When Lei Heng entered Lingguan Temple he saw a big fellow sleeping on the altar. The soldiers rushed forward, tied him up, and dragged him outside. It was only about the fifth watch—the sun had not yet risen.

Lei Heng said: "Let's take the lout to the manor of Ward Chief Chao. We can get some breakfast there, then we'll turn him over to the county magistrate for questioning."

The company proceeded rapidly to the manor.

The ward chief of East Bank Village was surnamed Chao, his given name was Gai. Born of a well-to-do family native to these parts for many generations, Chao had always fought injustice and helped the needy. He liked nothing better than befriending gallant men, and put them up in his manor whenever they came to him, no matter what the circumstances. When they were ready to go, he gave them silver for travelling expenses. Extremely fond of play with weapons, Chao was very strong. He had never married and practised body-building exercises from morning till night.

Outside the East Gate of Yuncheng, the county seat, were two villages which the county administered. Separated by a large stream, one was called East Bank, the other West Bank. Formerly evil spirits had haunted West Bank. They lured people into the stream in broad daylight, lying in wait

beneath the waters. No one could cope with them. One day a monk came by, and the villagers told him all about it. The monk pointed to a place, and instructed them to build a pagoda there of black stone; this would repress evil on the bank of the stream. The result was the spirits left the village of West Bank and moved over to East Bank.

When Chao Gai learned of this he was furious. He waded the stream, picked up the black stone pagoda, carried it across single-handed and deposited it on the East Bank. From then on he was famed as Chao Gai, the Tower-Shifting Heavenly King. He became the undisputed ruler of the village, and gallant men everywhere knew his name.

That morning Lei Heng and his soldiers took the big fellow to the manor and knocked on the gate. When the vassals learned who was calling, they reported to the ward chief. Chao Gai was still in bed, but hearing that Constable Lei had come, he ordered that the gate be opened immediately. The vassals complied. The soldiers suspended the big fellow from a rafter in the gate house, then Lei Heng took ten or so of their leaders to a hall and sat down.

Chao Gai, who had left his bed to greet them, asked: “What business brings you here, Constable?”

“On orders of his honor the magistrate, Zhu Tong and I have led two patrols into the countryside to look for bandits,” said Lei Heng. “Now we're tired and want to rest a while, so we've come to your manor. I hope we're not disturbing you.”

“Not at all,” replied Chao Gai. He told his vassals to prepare food and drink, and first to bring some tea. “Did you catch any thieves in our village?” he queried.

“Just now we discovered a big fellow sleeping in that Lingguan Temple out front. I could see he was no gentleman. He evidently got drunk and fell asleep there. So we tied him up, I was going to take him to the county magistrate straight away, but in the first place it's too early, and in the second place I wanted to inform you, Ward Chief. In case the magistrate

asks you about it in the future, you'll be able to answer. I have the prisoner hung up in your gate house."

Chao Gai made a mental note of this. "Thank you for telling me, Constable," he replied. A short time later, his vassals brought in wine and platters of food. Chao Gai said: "Talking out here is not very convenient. Let's sit inside." Ordering a vassal to light a lamp, he conducted Lei Heng to the porch of a rear building.

After they had both taken their places at a table—Chao Gai in the host's seat, Lei Heng in the guest's—a few vassals carried in platters of tidbits, while another poured the wine. Chao Gai ordered that wine also be given to the soldiers. The vassals led the soldiers to a covered walk and treated them as guests, serving large platters of meat and big bowls of wine. He urged them to eat their fill.

As he courteously plied the constable with food and drink, Chao Gai thought to himself: "What thief could he have caught in our village? I must have a look." He downed six or seven goblets of wine with Lei Heng, then summoned one of his stewards and said: "Keep the constable company. I'm going out to relieve myself. I'll be back shortly."

While the steward drank with Lei Heng, Chao Gai got a lantern and went directly to the main gate. None of the soldiers was around. All were inside, drinking. Chao Kai asked one of his vassals, who was guarding the gate: "That robber the constable caught—where have they got him tied?"

"He's locked in the gate house," said the vassal.

Chao Gai pushed open the door and looked. The fellow was suspended high above the floor. His body was a mass of swarthy flesh, his dangling legs were black and hairy, his feet were bare. Chao Gai shone his lantern on the man's face. It was ruddy and broad. On the side of his temple was a scarlet birthmark from which reddish-brown hair sprouted.

"Where are you from, young fellow?" Chao Gai asked him. "I haven't seen you in our village before."

“Your servant is a stranger from a distant district. I came to offer my services to a man, but they've arrested me as a thief. I must get justice.”

“Who did you want to join in this village?”

“A gallant man.”

“His name?”

“He's called Ward Chief Chao.”

“Why did you want to see him?”

“Chao Gai is famed everywhere as a champion of righteousness. There's a rare chance for riches I'd like to tell him about.”

“Seek no further. I am Ward Chief Chao. If you want me to save you, pretend to recognize me as your mother's brother. In a little while when I come here to see off Constable Lei and his men call me 'uncle'. I will address you as 'nephew'. Just say that you were only four or five years old when you left here. That's why you didn't recognize me when you came again, looking for me.”

“If you can rescue me, I'll be deeply grateful,” said the young man. “Please help me, champion!”

Carrying his lantern, Chao Gai left the gate house. He again barred the door, then hurried back to the building in the rear.

“Forgive me for neglecting you,” he said to Lei Heng.

“I'm putting you to too much trouble,” the constable replied. “It's really not right.”

They drank several cups of wine together. Soon light began shining in through the window.

“It's brightening in the east,” said Lei Heng. “Your servant must take his leave. I have to sign in at the county office.”

“You have your official duties, Constable. I dare not detain you. If business brings you to our humble village again, be sure to call on me.”

“I certainly will pay my respects, Ward Chief. Please don't bother to see me off.”

“At least let me escort you to the manor gate.”

Chao Gai and Lei Heng emerged from the building. The soldiers, who had dined well, now took up their pikes and staves and proceeded to the gate house. There they let down the young man they had suspended and led him out through the door, his hands tied behind his back.

“He's a big fellow!” Chao Gai remarked.

“That rogue is the thief we caught in Lingguan Temple,” said Lei Heng. Even before he had finished speaking, the young man shouted:

“Uncle, save me!”

Chao Gai pretended to peer at him. Then he cried: “Why, isn't that rascal Wang the Third?”

“Yes, it's me, uncle. Save me!”

Everyone was astonished. “Who is he?” Lei Heng asked Chao Gai. “How does he know you, Ward Chief?”

“He's my sister's son, Wang the Third! Why was the scamp resting in the temple? He lived here till he was four or five, then my sister and her husband moved to the Southern Capital. I didn't see him for ten years. He came again when he was about fifteen, accompanying a merchant from the city on a trip to buy dates. That was the last I saw of him. I've heard many people say the scoundrel is no good. What's he doing here? I'd never have recognized him if it weren't for that scarlet birthmark on the side of his temple!”

“Little Third,” he shouted at the young man, “why didn't you come to me directly? Why did you go into the village and steal?”

“But uncle, I didn't steal anything,” the young fellow protested.

“If you're not a thief, why have they brought you here?” Chao Gai demanded. Snatching a staff from one of the soldiers, he belabored the young man about the head.

“Don't beat him,” Lei Heng and the others urged. “Let's hear what he has to say.”

“Uncle, don't be angry,” said the young fellow. “Let me speak. Since the last time I came at the age of fifteen, ten years have gone by, isn't that so? Last night on the road I had one cup of wine too many. I didn't dare call on you drunk, so I went to the temple to sleep it off, first. How did I know they were going to nab me without a word? I'm not a thief.”

Chao Gai again rushed at him with the staff. “Animal,” he cried. “Instead of coming to me directly, you guzzled yourself full of yellow wine on the road. Couldn't you get all you want in my home? You've disgraced me!”

“Calm yourself, Ward Chief. Your nephew isn't a thief,” Lei Heng said soothingly. “I got suspicious, finding a big fellow like him asleep in the temple. After all, I'd never seen him before. So I arrested him and brought him here. I would never have done it had I known he was your nephew.”

Lei Heng ordered his soldiers to untie the young man and turn him over to the ward chief. They at once did so. “Please don't take it amiss,” the constable pleaded. “Had I known he was your nephew, this wouldn't have happened. I hope you're not offended. We must go back, now.”

“Just a moment, Constable,” said Chao Gai. “Please come into my small manor. I've something to say.”

Lei Heng returned with the ward chief to the hall. Chao Gai handed him ten ounces of silver. “Just a paltry gift, Constable,” Chao Gai said. “Please don't scorn it for being so small.”

“But you shouldn't be doing this.”

“If you don't accept, I'll know you're displeased with me.”

“Since you're so generous, Ward Chief, I can't refuse. Some day I'll show my gratitude.”

Chao Gai instructed the young man to thank Lei Heng. Then he distributed pieces of silver among the soldiers and saw the company to the manor gate. Lei Heng bade the ward chief farewell and departed with his men.

Chao Gai took the young man to the rear building and gave him clothes and a hat. He asked his name and place of origin.

“Your servant's family name is Liu, my given name is Tang. My ancestral home is in East Luzhou Prefecture. Because of this scarlet birthmark on the side of my temple, since childhood I've been known as the Red-Haired Demon. I've made this trip especially to inform you of a rare chance for riches, brother Ward Chief. Last night I fell asleep, drunk, in the temple, and those oafs nabbed me and tied me up. Fortunately, today, I've met you at last. Please be seated, brother, and accept my four kowtows.”

When the young man had completed his obeisances, Chao Gai said: “You say you have a rare chance to tell me about. What is it?”

“Ever since childhood, your servant has drifted about. I've been to many places and made friends with many gallant men. Though I've often heard them speak of you, brother, I never thought I'd have occasion to seek you out. I've also met men from east of the mountains and north of the river who've served under you, brother. That's why I'm willing to tell you this. If there are no outsiders around, I'd like to put the whole thing before you frankly.”

“You can speak freely. Only my most trusted men are here.”

“It's said that Governor Liang of Darning, the Northern Capital, has bought jewels and art objects worth a hundred thousand strings of cash to send to his father-in-law Cai the Premier in the Eastern Capital as birthday gifts. Last year he also sent birthday gifts of the same value. But they were seized

by unknown persons along the way. To this day the robbers haven't been caught."

"This year Governor Liang has bought another hundred thousand strings worth of jewels and art objects. The route by which they'll be sent has already been chosen. They must be delivered before Cai's birthday on the fifteenth of the sixth lunar month. In my humble opinion these things were purchased with unclean money. There will be nothing wrong in taking them. We've only to work out a plan for capturing them along the way. Heaven knows it will be no crime!"

"I've often heard that you're a real man, brother, and that you have a remarkable skill with weapons. Although I'm not very talented, I know a little about them myself. Not only can I deal with four or five men at a time, but if I had my lance I wouldn't be afraid even if two thousand men on horseback came at me together! If you don't despise me, brother, I'm more than willing to lend a hand. What do you think of the idea?"

"Excellent! We must plan carefully. But you've just come, and you've been rather battered about. Why not rest a while in the guest-house? Let me give the matter some thought. We'll talk more about it later."

Chao Gai ordered a vassal to lead Liu Tang to the guest-house. The vassal did so, then went off.

"I certainly was having a hard time," Liu Tang thought to himself. "It's lucky Chao Gai was able to get me out of that scrape. That lout Lei Heng grabbed me for a thief and suspended me all night from a rafter! The villain can't have travelled very far. Why not take a weapon and go after him? I can knock those rascals down, bring Chao Gai back his silver, and work off some of my anger at the same time. A great idea!" Liu Tang came out of the house, snatched a halberd from the rack and left the manor. As he strode south, the sky was already light. Soon he could see the constable and his soldiers marching slowly ahead. Hurrying after them, Liu Tang cried: "Constable, stand where you are!"

Startled, Lei Heng turned to see Liu Tang advancing towards him rapidly, halberd in hand. Lei hastily took a halberd from one of his soldiers.

“What do you want, varlet?” he shouted.

“If you know what's good for you, you'll give me those ten ounces of silver! Then maybe I'll forgive you!”

“Your uncle presented me with that money. What is it to you? If it weren't for his sake, I'd end your knavish life! What gall to demand my silver!”

“I'm no thief, but you suspended me from a rafter all night and swindled my uncle out of ten ounces of silver to boot! Return it to me, if you've got any sense, and I'll let you off. If you don't, I'll spill your blood on the spot!”

Furious, Lei Heng pointed his finger at Liu Tang and swore: “Worthless lying thief! You're a disgrace to your family! Impertinent dog!”

“Dirty extortioner of the people! You dare to curse me?”

“You're a bandit to the marrow of your bones! You're sure to implicate Chao Gail! You're a bandit, heart and liver! Don't think you can pull that sort of thing on me!”

“I'm going to settle with you once and for all!” Brandishing his halberd, the enraged Liu Tang charged towards Lei Heng.

The constable raised his own halberd with a laugh and strode forward to meet him. They clashed in the middle of the road and fought over fifty rounds, with neither vanquishing the other.

When the soldiers saw that Lei Heng couldn't defeat Liu Tang, they began closing in on the young man. But just then the fence gate of a nearby house opened and a man holding a length of chain in his hand emerged, crying: “You two bold men there—desist! I've been watching a long time. Rest a moment. I've something to say.” He swung the chain between the contestants. Both lowered their halberds, jumped out of the combat circle, and waited.

The man had the appearance of a scholar. He wore a cylindrical-shaped hat that came down almost to his eyebrows, and a wide flaxen gown with a

black border that was gathered at the waist by a tea-colored sash. His feet were clad in white socks and silk shoes. His handsome and refined face was adorned with a long beard. This was Wu Yong the Wizard. He was also known as the Pedant. His Taoist appellation was Master Increasing Light. Since the earliest times his family had resided in this neighborhood.

Chain in hand, Wu Yong pointed at Liu Tang and said: “Stay where you are, young man. Why are you fighting with the constable?”

Liu Tang glared at him. “None of your business, scholar!”

“I'll tell you why, Teacher,” said Lei Heng. “Last night we caught this rogue sleeping naked in the Lingguan Temple and brought him toward Chief Chao's manor. When we discovered that he was the ward chief's nephew, we released him for his uncle's sake. The ward chief invited us to have some wine and presented me with a gift. Unknown to his uncle, this scoundrel chased after us and demanded that I return the gift to him. How do you like that for nerve?”

“I've known Chao Gai ever since we were children,” Wu Yong thought to himself. “He's often discussed his private affairs with me, and I'm familiar with all of his relatives. But I've never heard of this nephew. Besides, he's the wrong age. There's something fishy here. I've got to stop this fight, first. Then I can question him.”

“Don't be so stubborn, big fellow,” he said to the young man. “Your uncle and I are close friends. I know that he's on good terms with this I constable. If you take back the little gift he's given him, it will make your uncle look bad. Have some respect for me. I'll talk this over with your uncle later.”

“Scholar, you don't know the facts,” said Liu Tang. “My uncle didn't give it willingly. The rogue squeezed that silver out of him! If he doesn't return it to me, I swear I'm not going back!”

“I'll return it only if the ward chief himself asks for it,” said Lei Heng. “I won't give it to you!”

“You slandered me and said I was a thief! You extorted my uncle's silver. How dare you refuse to return it!”

“It's not your silver! I won't return it! I won't! I won't!”

“You'll have to ask this halberd in my hand whether you'll return it or not!”

“You two have already fought for a long time without either of you winning,” said Wu Yong. “How much longer do you intend to fight?”

“If he doesn't return that silver, I'll fight him until only one of us is left alive!” cried Liu Tang.

“If I were afraid of you, I could have had one of my soldiers help me,” Lei Heng shouted angrily. “But I'm too much of a man for that! I'm going to knock you head over heels all by myself!”

Liu Tang thumped his chest furiously. “Let's see you do it!” He came at him.

The constable also advanced, brandishing his arms and stamping his feet. Both men were spoiling to resume the fight. Wu Yong thrust himself between them, but his admonitions were in vain. Liu Tang waved his halberd, just waiting for a chance to attack. Lei Heng, cursing the young fellow for ten thousand kinds of a thief, also held his halberd at the ready.

It was then that the soldiers exclaimed: “Here comes the ward chief.”

Liu Tang turned and looked. He saw Chao Gai, his unfastened tunic draped over his shoulders, running down the road. “Behave yourself, you young whelp!” shouted Chao Gai.

Wu Yong laughed. “Thank Heaven the ward chief has come. He's the only one who can stop them.”

Chao Gai rushed up, panting, “Why are you two fighting?”

“Your nephew chased after me, halberd in hand, and demanded my silver,” replied Lei Heng. “I said: 'I won't give it to you. I'll return it only to the

ward chief himself. This has nothing to do with you.' He fought me fifty rounds, then this teacher came and stopped us."

"That young animal!" said Chao Gai. "I didn't know anything about it. For my sake, Constable, please continue on your way. I'll call on you another day and make my apologies."

"I knew the young rascal was talking rot," said Lei Heng. "I didn't take him seriously. I'm sorry you've had to come all this distance." He bade the ward chief farewell and departed. We'll say no more of him.

Then Wu Yong confided to Chao Gai: "It's lucky you arrived when you did, or something serious might have happened. That nephew of yours is remarkable. As splendid fighter! I was watching from inside the fence. The famed halberd artist Lei Heng couldn't touch him. He was on the defensive all the time. If they had gone another few rounds, he surely would have lost his life. That's why I hurried out to stop them. Where is your nephew from? I've never seen him at your manor."

"I was just about to send a messenger to invite you over to my humble home for a talk when I noticed that Liu Tang was gone and a halberd missing from the rack," said Chao Gai. "A little cowherd told me he had seen a big fellow, carrying a halberd, running south. I hastily followed. Fortunately, you had already stopped the fight. Please come to my humble manor. There's a matter on which I need your advice."

Wu Yong first returned to his quarters and hung up the chain in his study. He said to his landlord: "When my students come, say that their teacher is busy today. Tell them they can take the day off." He closed his door and locked it, then proceeded with Chao Gai and Liu Tang to the ward chief's manor.

Chao Gai led them directly to an inner room in the rear building, where they took appropriate seats as host and guests.

"Ward Chief, who is this person?" Wu Yong asked.

“A bold fellow in the fraternity of gallant men, Liu Tang, from a family in East Luzhou Prefecture. He came especially to inform me of a rare chance for riches. Last night he fell asleep, drunk, in the Lingguan Temple, and Lei Heng nabbed him and brought him here. I pretended he was my nephew, and was able to save him. He told me: 'Governor Liang of Darning, the Northern Capital, has bought jewels and art objects worth a hundred thousand strings of cash to send to his father-in-law Cai the Premier in the Eastern Capital as birthday gifts. They will soon be passing this way. Since they were purchased with unclean money, there will be nothing wrong in taking them.'

“His proposal happens to coincide with a dream I had last night. I dreamed the seven stars of the Big Dipper had settled on the ridge of my roof. Another small star just above the handle turned into a streak of light. I thought to myself: To have stars shining right on your own house—that must be an auspicious sign! I intended to invite you over this morning, Teacher, and ask you what I should do.”

Wu Yong smiled. “I thought there was something odd about the sudden appearance of brother Liu, and was able to guess seven- or eight-tenths of what was up. His proposal is excellent, but there's only one thing —with too many people involved, we can't succeed; with too few, we're bound to fail. Though you have many vassals here, not one of them is suitable. But can just the three of us accomplish our aim? Even though you, Ward Chief, and you, brother Liu, are remarkable people, the answer is no. What we need is seven or eight gallant men. More than that would be no use.”

“Could that be the meaning of the number of stars in my dream?” asked Chao Gai.

“Brother's dream was no ordinary one,” replied Wu Yong, “Can it be that north of here there are people who can help us?” Frowning he pondered for several moments. Then he understood. “There are, there are!” he exclaimed.

“If you know some courageous men you can trust, Teacher,” said Chao Gai, “invite them to join us and put this thing through.”

Wu Yong placed two fingers together and calmly spoke a few words. And as a result, in East Bank righteous men became bold robbers, in Stone Tablet Village fishing boats became vessels of war. Truly, their commander could speak of all things in heaven and on earth, and turn up the rivers and roil the seas. What men did Wu Yong the Wizard recommend? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 15
Wu Yong Persuades the Three Ruan Brothers to Join Gongsun Sheng Becomes One of the Righteous Seven

“I have in mind three men,” said Wu Yong, “gallant, unusually skilled with weapons, men who'd dare to go through fire and water, who'd stand together to live or die. We must get them if our venture is to succeed.”

“What do these three do?” asked Chao Gai. “What are their names, and where do they live?”

“They are brothers, and they live in the village of Stone Tablet near Liangshan Marsh in Jizhou Prefecture. They are fishermen, though they've also done a bit of smuggling in the marsh. Their family name is Ruan. Second Brother is known as Ferocious Giant. Fifth Brother is called Recklessly Rash. Seventh Brother is nicknamed the Devil Incarnate. I once lived in their village a number of years and I got to know them. Although they haven't had any education, they're very loyal to their friends, and are good bold fellows, so we became quite close. I haven't seen them in over two years. If we can get those three, our big project is a sure thing.”

“I've heard of the three Ruan brothers, but we've never met. Stone Tablet is only about a hundred *li* from here. Why not send someone to invite them for a talk?”

“They'd never come. I'd better go myself and use this slick tongue of mine to persuade them to join us.”

“An excellent idea! When will you go?”

“There's on time to waste. If I leave tonight at the third watch I'll get there tomorrow before noon.”

“Fine.”

Chao Gai instructed a vassal to bring food and wine. “I've been from the Northern Capital to the Eastern Capital, but I don't know which route the birthday convoy will follow,” said Wu Yong. “Could we trouble brother Liu to go to the Northern Capital soon and find out exactly when it will set forth and along what roads it will travel?”

“I'll leave tonight,” said Liu Tang.

“Not so fast,” said Wu Yong. “The birthday is on the fifteenth of the sixth lunar month. Today is only the beginning of the fifth. We've still got forty or fifty days. Wait till I come back from the Ruans'. Then brother Liu can go.”

“Very well,” said Chao Gai. “Brother Liu can stay here in my manor.”

But enough of idle chatter. They drank for some time. At the third watch Wu Yong rose, washed, rinsed his mouth, had an early breakfast, concealed some silver on his person and put on his straw sandals. Chao Gai and Liu Tang saw him to the manor gate. Wu Yong travelled all night and arrived in Stone Tablet well before noon.

Since he knew the place, he didn't have to ask, but went directly to the home of Second Brother. The mooring lines of a few small fishing boats were tied to a post near the water's edge. A torn net was drying on a spindly fence. Between the bank and the hill slope stood ten or so thatched cottages.

Wu Yong approached and called: “Is Second Brother at home?”

Second Brother Ruan at once came out, a torn towel cloth binding his head, and wearing old clothes. He was barefoot. When he saw Wu Yong he hastily hailed him respectfully.

“Teacher,” he cried. “What good wind blows you here?”

“There is a small matter I've come specially to see Second Brother about.”

“What is it? Tell me.”

“It's been two years since I left this village. I am now a tutor in the home of a man of wealth. He is going to give a banquet and wants about a dozen golden carp of fourteen or fifteen catties each. I need your help.”

Second Brother laughed. “Let's have a few cups of wine together first.”

“That's why I've come!”

“There are a few taverns on the other side of the lake. I'll row you across.”

“Good. I'd like to speak to Fifth Brother, too. Do you know whether he's home?”

“Let's go see.”

They went down to the shore and untied one of the small boats from the post. Second Brother helped Wu Yong in, then took an oar that was lying beneath a tree and commenced sculling.

As they were moving out onto the lake, Second Brother suddenly waved his hand and called: “Ho, Seventh, have you seen Fifth?”

Only then did Wu Yong observe the small boat gliding out of the reeds. Seventh Brother was shaded from the sun by a black straw hat with a wide brim. He wore a checkered cloth vest and an apron of homespun. Still sculling, the younger man replied: “What do you want him for?”

“Seventh Brother,” Wu Yong shouted, “I've come to talk with you three.”

“Why, It's you, Teacher! Forgive me for not recognizing you. We haven't seen you in ages!”

“Come have a few drinks with Second Brother and me.”

“I've been longing to drink with you, Teacher. It's just that I haven't had the chance.”

One closely following the other, the two craft glided across the lake. Soon they arrived at a high bank surrounded by water, on which stood seven or eight thatched cottages.

“Mother,” called Second Brother. “Is Fifth Brother at home?”

“Who knows where he is,” the woman replied. “He doesn't fish, but just gambles every day till he hasn't a penny to his name. Now he's begged the hairpins from my head to bet them in his games.”

Second Brother laughed and rowed away. Seventh Brother shouted from the boat behind: “I don't know why he always loses. His luck must be bad. And he's not the only one who doesn't win. I've been cleaned out, too.”

Wu Yong thought: “That fits in with my plans perfectly.”

The boats headed for Stone Tablet's market center. After an hour or so, they came within sight of a single plank bridge. Beside it, a man carrying two strings of copper cash was untying a boat.

“It's Fifth Brother,” Second Brother exclaimed.

A tattered bandanna tilted rakishly on his head, a pomegranate flower tucked behind his ear, Fifth Brother wore an old tunic open to reveal the blue panther tattooed on his chest. His plain trousers were tied at the waist by a checkered towel.

Wu Yong hailed him: “Fifth Brother, did you win?”

“Well, if it isn't Teacher! It's a good two years since we met. I've been watching your boats from the bridge.”

“We went to your house first,” Second Brother explained. “Mother said you'd gone into town to gamble. So we came here. Let's take Teacher to that tavern overlooking the water.”

Fifth Brother untied his boat and jumped in. He grabbed his oar and, with one sweep, propelled it in line behind the other two.

Not long after, they arrived at a pavilion beside a cove of lotus flowers. They moored their craft and helped Wu Yong up the bank to the tavern. In a room facing the lake, they selected a red-lacquered table with red-lacquered benches.

“Please forgive the crudeness of us three brothers, Teacher,” said Second Brother, “and sit at the head of the table.”

“Oh, I couldn't do that,” said Wu Yong.

“Then you sit there, brother, and let Teacher have the guest's seat,” cried Seventh. “Fifth and I will sit down first.”

“Seventh Brother is still impetuous,” said Wu Yong.

The four took their places at the table, and ordered a bucket of wine. A waiter brought four large bowls, four pairs of chopsticks, and four vegetable dishes plus the wine bucket, and set them out on the table.

“Any meat to go with the wine?” asked Seventh.

“Beef from a freshly slaughtered ox,” said the waiter. “Tender as sponge cake!”

“We'll have ten catties, cut in large slices,” said Second.

“Don't laugh at our simple fare, Teacher,” said Fifth. “We're not dining you properly.”

“It's I who must beg forgiveness, for putting you to so much trouble.”

“Please say no more about it,” Second said. He told the waiter to pour the wine. By then two big platters of sliced meat had been placed on the table, and the Ruan brothers urged Wu Yong to try it.

He consumed several slices. When he could eat no more, his hosts tore into the remainder like ravening wolves and tigers, and demolished large quantities.

“What brings you here, Teacher?” Fifth finally asked.

“Teacher is now a tutor in a wealthy family,” said Second. “He needs a dozen golden carp weighing about fifteen catties each, and he's made this trip specially to ask our help.”

“Ordinarily, we could get you forty or fifty of that weight without any trouble, to say nothing of a dozen,” said Seventh, “but today even ten-catty carp are hard to come by.”

“You've travelled a long way, Teacher,” said Fifth. “We might manage a dozen or so five- or six-catty carp.”

“I've brought some silver. The price doesn't matter,” said Wu Yong. “But I can't use small fish. They must be the fourteen- or fifteen-catty size.”

“There's no place we can get them, Teacher,” said Seventh. “We can't even guarantee the five- or six-catty kind Fifth has promised. It may take us several days. I've a bucket of small live fish in my boat. Let's eat some of those while we're here.”

He went down to the boat and got the fish. They weighed a total of some six or seven catties. Seventh took them to the kitchen and cooked them himself. He brought them in three platters and placed them on the table.

“Try some of this, Teacher.”

The four of them ate for a time. Gradually, the sky darkened.

“I can't talk openly in this tavern,” thought Wu Yong. “I'll have to spend the night with one of them. We'll see what happens then.”

“It's getting late,” said Second. “Stay at my house tonight, Teacher. We can discuss this some more tomorrow.”

“Coming here hasn't been easy for me,” said Wu Yong, “but now, fortunately, we all are together. I can see you're not going to let me pay for this meal, but I'll be spending the night at Second Brother's, and I've brought a little silver. Could I trouble you to buy a jug of wine and some

meat in this tavern, and a brace of chickens in the village? Tonight, we'll get drunk together. How about it?”

“We can't let you pay, Teacher!” said Second. “We brothers will take care of it. Don't think we can't manage.”

“This has to be my treat,” said Wu Yong. “If you don't let me pay, I'm leaving.”

“All right, Teacher, if you insist, we'll eat with you gladly,” said Seventh. “We'll see about next time.”

“Brother Seventh is straight and to the point,” Wu Yong commended. He gave him an ounce of silver and told him to borrow a big jug from the tavern keeper and fill it with wine, and to buy also twenty catties of fresh and cooked beef and a couple of fat chickens.

“Take what I owe you out of that, too,” said Second.

“Fine, fine,” said the tavern keeper.

The four men left the tavern, went down to the boats, stored the meat and wine in the cabins, untied the mooring ropes and rowed to Second's house. In front of the door they stepped onto the bank and wound the ropes around the post, then took the meat and wine to the rear and sat down. Second called for a lamp. He was the only one of the three brothers who had a wife. Neither Fifth nor Seventh were married.

Host and guests sat in a rear pavilion overlooking the water. Seventh slaughtered the chickens and told his sister-in-law and the little boy she and Second had adopted to cook them. By the first watch, the wine and food were all on the table.

At Wu Yong's urging, he and the brothers drank several rounds. Again he raised the question of buying fish. “How is it you don't have the size I want in a big area like this?”

“To tell you the truth, Teacher, only Liangshan Marsh has fish that size,” replied Second. “Our Stone Tablet Lake is small and narrow. It can't produce big carp.”

“But it's not far from here to the marsh, and the two lakes are connected. Why not go there?”

Second breathed out heavily. “Don't ask!”

“Why do you sigh, brother?” Wu Yong queried.

“You don't know what's happened, Teacher,” Fifth put in. “Our whole livelihood depends on Liangshan Marsh, but we don't dare go.”

“Surely the magistrate can't stop you from fishing in a place that size?”

“Magistrate! If he were the King of Hell himself he couldn't stop us!”

“Then why are you afraid to go?”

“You haven't heard? We'll explain.”

“I haven't heard a thing.”

“It's painful to relate,” interjected Seventh, “but a gang of robbers has taken over the marsh, and they don't allow any fishing.”

“I had no idea there were robbers there,” said Wu Yong. “We haven't heard anything about it at my place.”

“Their head is a man who failed in his civil service examinations,” said Second. “His name is Wang Lun, and he's called the White-Clad Scholar. Second in command is Skyscraper Du Qian. Third is Guardian of the Clouds Song Wan. Below them is Zhu Gui, the Dry-Land Crocodile, who runs a tavern at the Lijia Entry as a blind for gathering information. He doesn't matter much. But now they've got a new lieutenant, a bold fellow who was an arms instructor in the Imperial Guards in the Eastern Capital—Panther Head Lin Chong. He's first rate with weapons. These men lead a band of six or seven hundred robbers who loot homes and waylay travellers.

We haven't gone to the marsh to fish for over a year. They've sewed it up tight, and cut off our main source of income. It hurts us to even talk about it!”

“This is news to me,” said Wu Yong. “Why don't the authorities come and capture them?”

“All the authorities know how to do is to disturb and hurt the people,” said Fifth. “The first thing they do when they come into the countryside is to eat all the villagers' pigs and sheep and chickens and ducks. You have to pay them to get them to leave. A fat lot of use those knaves would be against the brigands! And as for the police, they wouldn't dare come. They'd shit in their pants if the authorities ordered them to arrest the robbers. They'd be scared to even look at one!”

“We can't catch any big fish, this way,” said Second, “but at least we avoid paying taxes and doing forced labor.”

“So,” said Wu Yong. “Quite a happy life for those outlaws!”

“They fear neither Heaven nor Earth, nor the authorities, either,” said Fifth. “Money, fine clothes, wine and meat—they share and share alike. Why shouldn't they be happy? We three brothers are wasting our talents. If only we could be like them!”

Wu Young was inwardly very pleased. “That fits in perfectly with my plans,” he mused.

“Man lives only his given span, grass must die in autumn,” said Seventh. “We spend our lives catching fish. If we could be like them for just one day, we would be content!”

“Who wants to be like them?” scoffed Wu Yong. “All they do is commit crimes punishable with fifty to seventy strokes of the bamboo. They're frittering away their valor. If they're caught and imprisoned, they've only themselves to blame.”

“The authorities can't do anything about it. They're stupid blockheads,” said Second. “Thousands of men who've committed towering crimes are wandering around free as air! We brothers are unhappy with our lot. We'd leave here gladly if we could find someone to lead us.”

“We've often thought,” said Fifth, “we're not less capable than others. But who recognizes our worth?”

“If there was someone who did, would you really be willing to go?” queried Wu Yong.

“We'd go through fire and water,” Seventh assured him. “If we could be happy for a single day, we'd die smiling!”

“These three definitely have something in mind,” thought Wu Yong. “I'll gradually draw them out.”

He pressed the brothers to quaff another few rounds of wine.

“Would you have the courage to go into the marsh and capture those robbers?” he queried.

“Even if we could, who would we ask for the reward?” said Seventh. “Besides, gallant men everywhere would scorn us.”

“I have a little idea,” said Wu Yong. “If you're fed up with not being able to fish, why not join the outlaw gang?”

“We talked about that several times, Teacher,” said Second. “But we've heard that the men under Wang Lun the White-Clad Scholar all say he's narrow and stingy. He doesn't make proper use of people. He gave Lin Chong, that Eastern Capital arms instructor, a hard time when he first arrived. Wang Lun is very fussy about who he takes on. Since that's the way things are, we've lost interest.”

“It would be different if he was as big-hearted and as fond of us as you, Teacher,” said Seventh.

“In that case we would have gone there long ago. If Wang Lun were like you, we wouldn't be here today,” said Fifth. “We'd die for him without a qualm.”

“I don't deserve such praise. In Shandong and Hebei today there are plenty of bold gallants you could join.”

“No doubt there are,” said Second. “But we brothers have never met them.”

“What about Ward Chief Chao? Do you know him? He's right here in Yuncheng County, in East Bank.”

“You mean Chao Cai, the Tower-Shifting Heavenly King?” said Fifth.

“That's the man.”

“We know of him, of course,” said Seventh. “But though we live only a hundred *li* away, we haven't been fortunate enough to meet him.”

“How is that? Such a righteous, generous man.”

“We've never had any reason to go to East Bank,” said Second.

“These last few years I've been teaching in a village school near his manor,” said Wu Yong. “I hear he's expecting a very valuable shipment. I've come specially to ask whether you'd be willing to join me in snatching it on the way.”

“No,” said Fifth. “Since he's a noble and charitable person, we wouldn't damage his affairs. The whole fraternity of gallant men would laugh at us.”

“I didn't realize you brothers were so firmly principled. Your spirit is noble! I'll tell you the real story, if you're willing to help. I am now living in Chao's manor. Your fame has reached him, and he's sent me here to talk with you.”

“We three are completely honest,” said Second. “If the ward chief has sent you about some important private business where we can be of use, we pledge our help with our lives! On the dregs of this wine we swear it! May disaster strike us, may we die of horrible disease, if we speak false!”

Fifth and Seventh clapped their hands to the backs of their necks. “We sell this column of hot blood to the man who appreciates its worth,” they exclaimed.

“I assure you I don't want to induce you to do anything bad,” said Wu Yong. “This is something big! Cai, the Premier in the Eastern Capital, will celebrate his birthday on the fifteenth of the sixth lunar month. His son-in-law, Liang, the Governor of Darning, the Northern Capital, has spent a hundred thousand strings of cash on birthday gifts of gold and jewels. A brave fellow called Liu Tang just brought us the news. I've been asked to invite you to a conference, to plan how, with a few gallant men, we can waylay the convoy in some mountain hollow, take their misbegotten treasure! and enjoy ourselves for the rest of our lives. I had to pretend I wanted to buy fish so as to find a chance to invite you for a talk. Does the idea appeal to you?”

“Marvellous!” exclaimed Fifth. He turned to Seventh. “What did I tell you!”

Seventh leaped to his feet. “Just what I've been hoping for all my life! This scratches me where I itch! When do we start?”

“We'll leave for Ward Chief Chao's manor tomorrow at the fifth watch!”

The three brothers were delighted.

The night passed. Early the next morning, the men rose and had breakfast. They gave a few words of instructions to their families and set out from Stone Tablet with Wu Yong for East Bank. They walked all day, and finally came in sight of Chao Manor. The ward chief and Liu Tang were waiting outside beneath a green locust tree. When Wu Yong led the three brothers forward, Chao and Liu greeted them warmly.

“The eminent Ruan brothers,” cried the ward chief, “I see you're entirely deserving of your fame! Let's talk inside.”

The six men entered the manor, went to a rear hall, and took their seats as host and guests. Wu Yong reported. Chao was extremely pleased. He

instructed his vassals to slaughter a pig and a sheep and prepare sacrificial paper ingots.

Chao presented so noble a mien, he spoke so freely, that the three brothers were moved to say: “Our greatest pleasure is meeting gallant men, and here you were, all along! To think we might not have had the chance of meeting you if Wu Yong hadn't brought us here!” They were clearly overjoyed.

All ate and chatted half the night. At dawn the next day they rose and went to the rear hall. Laid out before it were gold paper coins and paper horses, incense and candles, the pig and sheep which had been cooked the previous night, and paper replicas of silver ingots. The others were happy to see that Chao was so sincere.

Together they made this solemn vow. “Governor Liang in the Northern Capital harms the people. With the money he has extorted from them he has bought gifts to send to Cai, the Premier in the Eastern Capital, on his birthday. This is evilly obtained wealth. If any of us six has any selfish intent, let Heaven and Earth obliterate him! May the gods be our witness!”

After taking their oath, they burned the paper money.

They ended the ceremony and drank. A vassal entered.

“There is a Taoist priest at the gate who wants to see the ward chief about a grain contribution.”

“How can you be so tactless?” Chao berated him. “Can't you see I'm drinking here with guests? Give him four or five measures of rice and be done with it. Why bother me?”

“I've already offered him rice but he won't take it. He wants to see you.”

“He probably thinks it's not enough. Give him two or three pecks. Tell him the ward chief is drinking with guests and has no time.”

The vassal departed. A few minutes later her returned.

“I've offered the priest three pecks of rice, but he refuses to leave. He says he's an honest Taoist, that he hasn't come for any handouts, but to see you.”

“You don't know how to talk to him. Tell him I have no time for him today, to come another time and I'll invite him to tea.”

“I did that, but the priest said: 'I haven't come for money or grain, but because I've heard the ward chief is a man of chivalry. I'm very eager to meet him.'”

“What a nuisance you are! Why can't you take care of this! If he's still not satisfied with the amount of grain, give him three or four pecks more. Don't keep asking me about it. I'd see him if I weren't entertaining. Why not? But now, get rid of him, and don't trouble me again.”

The vassal hadn't been gone very long, when an uproar was heard outside the manor gate. Another vassal rushed in and reported: “That priest is in a rage. He's knocked down ten of our fellows!”

Startled, Chao Gai hastily rose to his feet. “Excuse me a moment, brothers,” he said. “I'd better see about this.” He left the hall and went out to the gate.

There, under the green locust tree, a handsome, powerful, but strange-looking priest was fighting off his attackers. “You don't know a good man when you see him!” he was shouting.

“Cool down, sir priest,” Chao called. “You came asking for Ward Chief Chao, apparently wanting a contribution. They gave you rice. Why get into such a temper?”

The priest laughed. “I'm not interested in grain or money. A hundred thousand strings of cash means nothing to me. I'm seeking the ward chief because I've something to tell him. These churls wouldn't listen to reason, and began swearing at me. That's why I blew up.”

“Do you know the ward chief?”

“I've heard of him. But we've never met.”

“I am that humble person. What did you want to tell me, sir priest?”

“I beg your pardon, Ward Chief. Please accept my greetings.”

“You're most courteous. Won't you come into the manor and have some tea?”

“Thank you very much.”

The two entered the manor. When Wu Yong and the others saw the priest approaching, they quietly slipped out of sight.

Chao Gai led the priest to the rear hall. After sipping tea for a while, the priest said: “This isn't a good place to talk. Is there somewhere else we could go?”

The ward chief took him to a small room, and again they seated themselves as host and guest. “May I ask your name, sir, and where you are from?” queried Chao.

“My family name is Gongsun, my given name Sheng. In the Taoist order I am called Single Purity. I was born in Jizhou Prefecture. Since childhood I have loved playing with weapons, and have become quite skilled in many of them, so people call me Gentleman Gongsun Sheng. I have also studied Taoist lore. Because I can summon the wind and bring the rain, ride the mists and drive the clouds, in the fraternity of gallant men I'm nicknamed Dragon in the Clouds. I have long known of the eminent Ward Chief Chao of East Bank, Yuncheng County, but I've never had the good fortune of meeting you. In honor of making your acquaintance, and by way of introducing myself, I would like to present you with a hundred thousand strings of cash worth of gold and jewels. I wonder whether the Ward Chief would accept?”

Chao laughed. “You mean the shipment of birthday gifts from the Northern Capital?”

The priest was astonished. “How did you know?”

“I just guessed. I gather we're talking about the same thing?”

“A real treasure! This is too good an opportunity to miss. 'If you fail to take when you've got the chance, don't bemoan it later,' as the old saying goes. How does the idea strike you, Ward Chief?”

At that moment a man dashed into the room and grabbed Gongsun by the front of his robe. “A fine thing!” the man shouted. “You defy the laws of the emperor and the gods. How dare you hatch such schemes? I've been listening for a long time!”

Gongsun's face turned the color of clay. Truly, before his plan was formed, someone outside the window heard everything, and could have brought disaster down upon him. Who, after all, was the man who seized Gongsun? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 16
Yang Zhi Escorts a Convoy of Precious Goods
Wu Yong by a Ruse Captures the Birthday Gifts

The man who seized Gongsun Sheng was Wu Yong the Wizard. Chao Gai laughed. “Don't tease him. Teacher. Permit me to introduce you.” The two exchanged bows.

“I have long known the fame of Gongsun Sheng among gallant men,” said Wu Yong. “I didn't expect to have the pleasure of meeting you today.”

“This savant is called Wu Yong the Wizard,” said Chao Gai.

“In the chivalrous fraternity many have spoken of your illustrious name,” said Gongsun. “Who would have thought I'd have the good fortune to meet you here in the ward chief's manor! Of course, thanks to his generosity and chivalry, bold men from all over call at his door.”

“There are a few others inside I'd like you to meet,” said Chao Gai. “Please come with me to the rear room.” The three went in and the ward chief

presented Liu Tang and the three Ruan brothers to Gongsun Sheng.

“This encounter cannot be an accident,” they said. “Please, brother Chao, sit at the head of the table.”

“I'm just a poor host with no delicacies to offer you fine guests,” Chao Gai protested. “How dare I presume?”

“Please, brother,” said Wu Yong, “be guided by me. You're the eldest among us. You must take that seat.”

Only then did Chao Gai consent to sit in the first place. Wu Yong was seated second, Gongsun third, Liu Tang fourth, Ruan the Second fifth, Ruan the Fifth sixth, and Ruan the Seventh seventh. They drank together to celebrate their meeting, then the table was re-laid, and more wine and tidbits were served, and once more they drank.

“The ward chief has dreamt that the seven stars of the Big Dipper settled on the ridge of his roof, and now we seven, with the same righteous purpose in mind, encounter each other here today,” said Wu Yong.

“Surely that is an omen from Heaven. We can take the precious convoy easily. I suggest that brother Liu Tang find out which route the convoy will follow. It's too late today, but would he please set out early tomorrow?”

“No need for that,” said Gongsun. “I already know. It's coming by way of the big road over Yellow Earth Ridge.”

“Ten *li* east of there is the village of Anlo,” said Chao Gai. “In Anlo lives an idler named Bai Sheng, better known as the Daylight Rat. He once sought me out, and I helped him with a little money.”

“The Big Dipper gives off a white light. It must mean that man,” said Wu Yong. “We can use him.”

“But we're quite far from Yellow Earth Ridge. Where should we lie in wait?” asked Liu Tang.

“At Bai Sheng's place,” said Wu Yong. “We'll be safe there. And we'll have other uses for him as well.”

“Will we employ soft tactics or hard?” queried Chao Gai.

Wu Yong laughed. “I've already thought of a method. It all depends on how the convoy reacts. We'll meet force with force and guile with guile. I have a plan, but I don't know whether you will approve.” He outlined his proposal.

Chao Gai stamped his foot delightedly. “Marvellous! No wonder they call you the Wizard. You're better than Zhuge Liang. An excellent plan!”

“Let's not talk about it again,” said Wu Yong. '“The walls have ears and people pass outside windows,' as the old saying goes. We must keep this strictly among ourselves.”

“Please go back, you three,” Chao Gai said to the Ruan brothers, “and return again when the time comes. Master Wu Yong, go on with your school teaching, as usual. Gongsun and Liu Tang can live here for the time being.”

They drank until dark, then retired to rest in the various guest-rooms.

The next morning at the fifth watch they rose and had breakfast. Chao Gai presented the three Ruan brothers with thirty ounces of snow-white silver. “A small token of my regard,” he said. “Please don't refuse.” At first the three brothers wouldn't consider it, but Wu Yong said: “Friendly gestures should not be rejected,” and so they finally accepted.

All saw them off to the outside of the manor. Wu Yong gave them instructions in a low voice. “Be sure to be on time,” he enjoined them.

The Ruan brothers took their leave and returned to Stone Tablet Village. Chao Gai kept Gongsun Sheng and Liu Tang on in the manor. Wu Yong often came over to discuss their affairs.

But enough of idle talk. Let's get back to Governor Liang in Darning, the Northern Capital. After buying birthday gifts valued at a hundred thousand strings of cash, he chose a date to start them on their way.

The following day, as he was sitting in the rear hall, his wife, Madame Cai, asked him: “When will the birthday gifts go off, Your Excellency?”

“Tomorrow or the day after. I've bought everything I want. There's only one thing that's troubling me.”

“What is it?”

“Last year I purchased a hundred thousand strings of cash worth of jewels and art objects and sent them to the Eastern Capital, but because I didn't pick the right men they were seized by bandits on the road. To this day the robbers haven't been caught. At present I don't know of anyone really competent in my retinue. That is what's troubling me.”

Madame Cai pointed to a man standing at the foot of the steps. “Haven't you often said that this fellow is quite remarkable? Why not entrust him with the mission? He can see it through.”

The man she indicated was Yang Zhi, the Blue-Faced Beast. Liang was pleased. He summoned Yang Zhi into the hall.

“I had forgotten you,” Liang said. “If you can safely deliver the birthday gifts for me, I'll have you raised in rank.”

Yang Zhi clasped his hands together respectfully. “Since that is what Your Excellency wishes, I must of course comply. How shall the convoy be composed, and when shall it set forth?”

“I'm ordering the prefectural government to supply ten extralarge carts, and will send the service personnel from the city guard to escort them. Each cart will carry a yellow banner reading: 'Convoy of Birthday Gifts to the Premier'. In addition, I will have one strong soldier follow each of the carts. You can leave within the next three days.”

“It's not that I'm unwilling, but I really can't do it. Please give the mission to some brave and skilful person.”

“It's my desire to raise you in rank. Along with the birthday gift documents, I intend to include a letter to the Premier, strongly recommending you. You'll return with his nomination for an official post. Why do you refuse to go?”

“Your servant has heard that the gifts were robbed last year, Excellency, and that the bandits still have not been caught. There are many brigands on the road these days. From here to the Eastern Capital there is no water route; you have to go entirely by land. Purple Gold Mountain, Two-Dragon Mountain, Peach Blossom Mountain, Umbrella Mountain, Yellow Earth Ridge, White Sand Valley, Wild Cloud Ford, and Red Pine Forest—all must be crossed, and all are infested with bandits. No merchant dares travel through them alone. If the bandits know we're carrying a precious cargo, of course they'll want to seize it. We'll just be throwing our lives away. That is why I can't go.”

“In that case I'll simply provide you with a larger military escort.”

“Even if you gave me ten thousand men, it wouldn't solve anything, Your Excellency. Those craven oafs would run as soon as they heard the bandits coming.”

“Do you mean to say that the birthday gifts can't be delivered?”

“If you'll grant your servant one request, I will undertake the mission.”

“Since I'm willing to entrust you with it, why not? State your wish.”

“As I see it, Your Excellency, we shouldn't use any carts. Pack the gifts into containers to be carried, disguised as merchandise, on shoulder-poles. Let the ten strong soldiers serve as porters. I'll need only one more person, also dressed as a merchant, to go as my assistant. We'll travel quietly day and night until we reach the Eastern Capital and deliver the goods. That way we'll be able to do it.”

“It shall be as you wish. I'll write a letter strongly recommending you for an official appointment.”

“My profoundest thanks, Excellency, for your gracious kindness.” That same day Yang Zhi made up the loads and picked his soldiers. The following day he was again summoned to the rear hall. Governor Liang came out and asked: “Yang Zhi, when will you be ready to leave?”

“We would like to start tomorrow morning, Your Excellency. I'm just waiting for the official documents.”

“My wife has some gifts for her women relatives. I want you to take them along too. I'm afraid you won't know your way around the Premier's chancellery, so I'm sending with you Chief Steward Xie and two captains of the guards.”

“I won't be able to go then, Excellency.”

“Why not? The gifts are all packed in containers.”

“I was made responsible for ten loads of gifts, and the soldiers were put in my charge. If I told them to march early, they'd march early. If I said late, then late it would be. They'd spend the night where I directed, and rest when I ordered it. Everything would be up to me. But now you also want to send the chief steward and two captains. The steward is one of madame's men, the husband of her old wet-nurse when she was an infant in the Premier's chancellery. If he disagreed with me on the road how could I argue? Yet the blame would be mine if the mission failed.”

“That's easy. I'll tell him and the captains to do whatever you say.”

“In that case, your servant is willing to accept the mission. May I be severely punished if I fail.”

The governor was delighted. “I haven't decided to promote you in vain. You're a very sensible fellow.” Summoning Chief Steward Xie and the two captains to the hall he gave them official orders: “Major Yang Zhi has accepted a mission to deliver birthday gifts—eleven loads of jewels and art

objects—to the Premier's chancellery in the Eastern Capital. He is fully responsible. You three are to accompany him. During the journey he alone will decide whether to start early or late, where to spend the night, and when to rest. None of you is to cross him. You already know what madame wants done. Be cautious and prudent, leave soon and return quickly, don't let anything go wrong."

The old chief steward promised to obey the governor's injunctions.

Before dawn the next morning the loads were lined up outside the main hall. The chief steward and the captains brought another batch of valuables —making a total of eleven loads. Eleven strong soldiers of the guard were selected and disguised as porters. Yang Zhi was wearing a broad-brimmed hat and a black silk tunic. His feet were shod in hemp sandals tied with laces of cord. At his waist was a sword, and he carried a halberd in his hand.

The old steward was also dressed as a merchant. The two captains were disguised as lackeys. Each carried a halberd and a rattan switch. Governor Liang handed over the official documents. After all had eaten their fill, they formally took their leave in front of the hall. Liang watched the soldiers raise the carrying-poles to their shoulders and set forth. Together with Yang Zhi, the old steward and the two captains, a total of fifteen men left the governor's compound. Marching out of the Northern Capital's city gate, they proceeded down the highway in the direction of the Eastern Capital.

It was then the middle of the fifth lunar month. Although the skies were clear, walking was difficult in the broiling sun. Determined to deliver the gifts in time for the Premier's birthday on the fifteenth of the sixth lunar month, Yang Zhi pushed the march on briskly. During the first week after the convoy left the Northern Capital, they set out every day before dawn to take advantage of the morning cool, and rested in the heat of noon.

By the sixth or seventh day, dwellings were few and far between, travellers had thinned out, and the road began climbing into the mountains. Yang Zhi now started the marches well after sunrise and didn't stop until late in the afternoon. The eleven guards were all carrying heavy loads and the weather was hot. Walking was a severe effort. Whenever they saw a grove they

wanted to rest, but Yang Zhi drove them on. If they halted, the least he did was curse them, and often he flogged them with his switch, forcing them to continue.

The two captains, although they bore on their backs only light luggage, gasped for breath and kept falling to the rear. Yang Zhi berated them harshly.

“How can you two be so ignorant? I'm responsible for this mission. Instead of helping me beat the porters, all you do is drag behind. This road is no place to dally!”

“It's not that we want to go slowly,” said the captains. “We just can't move any faster in this heat. A few days ago we always set out early when it was cool, but now we march only during the hottest hours of the day. Can't you tell the difference between fair conditions and foul?”

“You're talking farts, not words! A few days ago we were in a good part of the country, now we're in a very ticklish place. We must march in broad daylight. Who dares to set out while it's still dark?”

The captains said no more. But they thought to themselves: “That rogue swears at people whenever he likes!”

His halberd in one hand, his switch in the other, Yang Zhi urged on the convoy. The two captains sat beneath a tree and waited for the chief steward to catch up.

“That murderous Yang Zhi is only a major in his excellency's guard,” they complained to the old man. “What right has he to act so mighty?”

“The governor ordered us not to cross him. That's why I haven't said anything. These past few days I too have found him hard to bear. But we must be patient.”

“His excellency was only trying to make him feel good. You're the chief steward. Why don't you take over?”

“We must be patient with him,” the old steward repeated. That day they again marched until late afternoon. Then they stopped at an inn. Sweat was raining from the eleven porters. Groaning and sighing, they addressed the steward:

“Unfortunately we're soldiers of the guard, and have to go where we're ordered. For the past two days we've been carrying these heavy loads in the burning sun, instead of starting early when it's cool. For anything at all, we're given a taste of the switch! We're flesh and blood too. Why should we be treated so cruelly?”

“Don't complain,” the steward urged them. “When we get to the Eastern Capital, I'll reward you personally.”

“Of course we wouldn't have said anything, Chief Steward,” they replied, “if we had someone like you looking after us.”

Another night passed. The following morning everyone rose before daylight, hoping to march early while it was still cool. But Yang Zhi jumped up and roared: “Where do you think you're going? Back to bed! I'll call you when it's time to leave!”

“We don't set out early,” muttered the guards, “and in the heat of the day when we can't walk, he beats us!”

Swearing, Yang Zhi yelled: “What do you clods understand!” He threatened them with his rattan switch. The soldiers had no choice but to swallow their complaints and return to bed.

After the sun had risen and everyone finished a leisurely breakfast, the convoy resumed its march. Yang Zhi pushed on at a rapid pace, with no pauses for rest in the shade. The eleven guards grumbled constantly, and the two captains made no end of peevish observations to the chief steward. Although the old man did not reply, in his heart he was very irritated with the leader of the expedition.

To make a long story short, after marching for fifteen days there wasn't a man in the convoy who didn't hate Yang Zhi. On the fourth day of the sixth

month they again rose late and slowly cooked breakfast. Then they set out. Even before noon the sun was a fiery red ball on high. There wasn't a cloud in sight. It was really hot. Now they were travelling along winding mountain trails. Towering peaks looked down on them from all sides. After marching about twenty *li* the porters were longing to relax in the shade of a willow grove. Yang Zhi lashed them with his switch.

“Move on,” he shouted. “I'll teach you to rest before it's time!”

The guards looked up. There wasn't even half a cloud in the sky. The heat was simply unbearable. Yang Zhi hurried the convoy along a path fringing the mountain. It was about noon then, and the stones were so hot they burned the porters' feet. Walking was extremely painful.

“A scorching day like this,” groaned the guards. “You're killing us!”

“Hurry up,” Yang Zhi urged. “First cross that ridge ahead, then we'll see.”

The column of fifteen men hastened on until they mounted the earthen ridge. Then the porters lowered their carrying-poles and threw themselves down beneath the pine trees.

“A fine place you've picked for cooling off,” Yang Zhi ranted. “Get up, quick! We've got to push on!”

“Even if you cut us into eight pieces, we can't move another step!” retorted the soldiers.

Yang Zhi seized his switch and lashed them over the head and shoulders. But by the time he beat one to his feet another lay down again. He could do nothing with them. It was at this time that the old steward and the two captains climbed panting to the top of the ridge and sat down beneath a pine, gasping for breath. The old man saw Yang Zhi belaboring the porters.

“It's really much too hot to march, Major,” he said. “Forgive them.”

“You don't understand, Chief Steward. This is Yellow Earth Ridge, a favorite haunt of bandits. Even in peaceful times they robbed here in broad

daylight, to say nothing of what they do in times like these! Stopping here is very dangerous."

"That's what you always say," countered the two captains. "You just use those stories to scare people!"

"Let the porters rest a bit," the steward urged. "We'll start again after noon, what do you say?"

"Impossible. Where's your judgment? For seven or eight *li* around the ridge there isn't a single house. Who dares rest in the shade in a place like this?" Yang Zhi retorted.

"You go on with the porters first, then," said the steward. "I've got to sit a while."

Yang Zhi picked up his rattan switch and roared at the soldiers: "Any man who doesn't march gets twenty blows of this!"

They all noisily protested. "Major," one of them cried, "while you walk empty-handed we're carrying well over a hundred catties apiece! You act as if we weren't even human! If the governor himself were in charge of this convoy, he'd at least let us say a word or two. You have no feeling at all! The only thing you know is to storm and rage!"

"Wretched animal! A beating is all his kind understands!" Yang Zhi rained blows on the man with his rattan switch.

"Stop, Major!" shouted the steward. "Listen to me. In my days in the Premier's chancellery I met thousands of officers, and every one of them treated me with deference! I don't mean to be rude, but it seems to me that an officer under sentence of death whom His Excellency has pitied and made a major of the guard—a post no bigger than a mustard seed—shouldn't be so pompous! Even if I were only a village elder, to say nothing of the governor's chief steward, you ought to heed my advice! Always beating the porters—what sort of conduct is that?"

“You're city dweller, Steward, born and raised in official residences. What do you know of the hardships of the road?”

“I've been as far as Sichuan, Guangdong and Guangxi, but I've never seen anyone who behaved like you!”

“You can't compare today with times of peace!”

“You deserve to have your tongue cut out if you say such things! What's unpeaceful about today?”

Yang Zhi was going to reply when he saw a shadowy figure poke his head out of a grove opposite and peer at them. “What did I tell you?” he shouted. “Isn't that a bad fellow over there?” Ringing aside his switch, he seized his halberd and charged into the grove, shouting: “Insolent villain! How dare you spy on our convoy?”

In the grove he found a line of seven wheel-barrows and six men, buff naked, resting in the shade. One of them, a fellow with a scarlet birthmark on the side of his temple, grabbed a halberd when he saw Yang Zhi advancing. The seven men cried in alarm: *“Aiya!”* and leaped to heir feet.

“Who are you?” Yang Zhi yelled.

“Who are you?” the seven countered.

“Aren't you robbers?”

“That's what we should be asking you! We're only small merchants. We haven't any money to give you!”

“So you're merchants. And I suppose I'm rich!”

“Who are you, really?”

“Tell me first where you're from.”

“We seven are from Haozhou. We're bringing dates to sell in the Eastern Capital. At first we hesitated to pass this way because many people say that

bandits often rob merchants on Yellow Earth Ridge. But then we said to ourselves: 'All we've got are some dates and nothing of any value.' So we decided to cross. Since the weather is so hot, we thought we'd rest in this grove till the cool of evening. When we heard you fellows coming up the rise we were afraid you might be bandits, so we sent this brother for a look."

"So that's how it is—only ordinary merchants! I thought he was a robber when I saw him watching us, so I hurried in here to investigate."

"Please have some dates, sir," said the seven.

"No, thanks," replied Yang Zhi. Halberd in hand, he returned to the convoy.

"Since there are bandits around, we'd better leave," said the chief steward, who was seated beneath a tree.

"I thought they were bandits, but they're only date merchants," Yang Zhi explained.

"According to you," the old steward remarked, "these fellows were all desperadoes!"

"No need to quarrel," said Yang Zhi. "I only want everything to go well. You men can rest. We'll march on after it cools down a bit."

The guards smiled. Yang Zhi stabbed the point of his halberd into the ground, then he too sat down beneath a tree to rest and cool off.

In less time than it takes to eat half a bowl of rice, another man appeared in the distance. Carrying two buckets on the ends of a shoulder-pole, he sang as he mounted the ridge:

Beneath a red sun that burns like fire,

Half scorched in the fields is the grain.

Poor peasant hearts with worry are scalded,

While the rich themselves idly fan!

Still singing, he walked to the edge of the pine grove, rested his buckets and sat down in the shade of a tree.

“What have you got in those buckets?” the soldiers asked him.

“White wine.”

“Where are you going with it?”

“To the village, to sell.”

“How much a bucket?”

“Five strings of cash—not a copper less.”

The soldiers talked it over. “We're hot and thirsty. Why not buy some? It will ease the heat in our bodies.” They began chipping in.

“What are you fellows up to?” Yang Zhi shouted, when he noticed what they were doing.

“We're going to buy a little wine.”

Yang Zhi flailed them with the shaft of his halberd. “What gall! How dare you buy wine without asking me?”

“Always raising a stinking fuss over nothing! It's our money! What is it to you if we buy wine? You beat us for that, too!”

“What do you stupid clodhoppers know anyhow? All you can think of is guzzling! But not a thought do you give to all the tricks that are pulled on the road! Do you know how many good men have been toppled by drugs?”

The wine vendor looked at Yang Zhi and laughed coldly. “You don't know much yourself, master merchant. I wasn't going to sell you any in the first place. What a dirty thing to say about a man's wine!”

As they were quarrelling, the date merchants emerged from the grove, halberds in hand. “What's the trouble?” they asked.

“I was carrying this wine across the ridge to sell in the village and stopped to cool off when these fellows asked if they could buy some,” the vendor said. “I didn't let them have any. Then this gentleman claimed my wine was drugged. Is he trying to be funny, or what?”

“Pei!” snorted the seven. “We thought robbers had come, at least! So that's what all the row was about. Suppose he did say it—so what? We were just thinking of having some wine ourselves. If they're suspicious, sell a bucket to us. We'll drink it.”

“No, no! Nothing doing!” said the vendor.

“We didn't say anything against you, you dull clod,” cried the seven. “We'll give you the same price you'd get in the village. If you sell to us, what's the difference? You'll be doing a good deed, like handing out tea on a hot day, and quenching our thirst at the same time!”

“I don't mind selling you a bucket, but they said my wine is bad. Besides, I don't have any dipper.”

“You take things too seriously. What do you care what they said? We have our own dippers.”

Two of the date merchants brought out two coconut ladles from one of the wheel-barrows, while a third scooped up a big handful of dates. Then the seven gathered around the bucket and removed its cover. Ladling out the wine in turn, they drank, while munching the dates. Before long the bucket was empty.

“We haven't asked you the price yet,” said the seven.

“I never bargain,” the vendor asserted. “Exactly five strings of cash per bucket—ten strings for the load.”

“Five strings you say, then five strings it shall be. But give us one free scoop out of the other bucket.”

“Can't be done. My prices are fixed.”

While one of the date merchants paid him the money, another opened the cover of the second bucket, ladled up some wine and started to drink it. The vendor hurried towards him, but the man ran into the pine grove with the half consumed dipper of wine. As the vendor hastened after him, another merchant emerged from the grove with another ladle. He dipped this into the bucket and raised it to his lips. The vendor rushed over, seized the ladle, and dumped its contents back into the bucket. Replacing the cover, he flung the ladle to the ground.

“You look like a proper man—why don't you act like one?” he fumed. “Is that any way to behave?”

When the soldiers saw this, their throats felt even drier. All were longing for a drink. “Put in a word for us, old grandpa,” one of them begged the chief steward. “Those date merchants drank a bucket of his wine. Why shouldn't we buy the other and wet our throats? We're hot and thirsty, and have nothing else to drink. There's no place to get water on this ridge. Do us a favor, old grandpa!”

The old steward heard them out. He felt like having a drink himself. So he conferred with Yang Zhi.

“Those date merchants have already finished a bucket of that vendor's wine. Only one bucket is left. Why not let them buy some wine and ward off heat stroke? There really isn't any place on this ridge to get water.”

Yang Zhi thought to himself: “I watched those birds finish off his first bucket, and drink half a ladleful from the second. The wine must be all right. I've been beating out porters for hours. Maybe I ought to let them buy a few drinks.”

Aloud, he said: “Since the chief steward suggests it, you rogues can have some wine. Then we'll march on.”

The soldiers chipped in and raised the price of a bucket. But the vendor refused them. “I'm not selling, I'm not selling!” he said angrily. “This wine is drugged!”

“Don't be like that, brother,” the soldiers said with placating smiles. “Is it worth making such a fuss?”

“I'm not selling,” said the vendor, “so don't hang around!”

The date merchants intervened. “Stupid oaf!” they berated him. “What if that fellow said the wrong thing? You're much too serious. You've even tried to take it out on us. Anyhow, it has nothing to do with these porters. Sell them some wine and be done with it!”

“And give him a chance to cast suspicion on me for no reason at all?” the vendor demanded.

The date merchants pushed him aside and handed the bucket to the soldiers, who removed the cover. Having no ladles, they apologetically asked the merchants if they could borrow theirs.

“Have some dates, also, to go with your wine,” said the merchants.

“You're very kind.”

“No need to be polite. We're all travellers together. What do a hundred or so dates matter?”

The soldiers thanked them. The first two ladles of wine they presented to Yang Zhi and the chief steward. Yang Zhi refused, but the old man drank his. The next two ladlefuls were consumed by the two captains. Then the soldiers swarmed around the bucket and imbibed heartily.

Yang Zhi wavered. The soldiers showed no ill effects. Besides, the weather was hot and his throat was parched. Scooping up half a ladle of wine, he drank it while munching on a few dates.

“Those date merchants drank a couple of ladlefuls out of this bucket, so you had less wine,” the vendor said to the soldiers. “You can pay me half a string of cash less.”

The soldiers gave him his money. The vendor took it, then, carrying his shoulder-pole and empty buckets, he swung off down the ridge, again singing a folk song.

Standing on the edge of the pine grove, the seven date merchants pointed at the fifteen men of the convoy and said: “Down you go! Down you go!” The fifteen, weak in the knees and heavy in the head, stared at each other as, one by one, they sank to the ground. Then the seven merchants pushed the seven wheel-barrows out of the grove and dumped the dates. Placing the eleven loads of jewels and art objects into the barrows, they covered them over.

“Sorry to trouble you,” they called, and trundled off down the ridge.

Yang Zhi, too weak to move, could only groan inwardly. The fifteen couldn't get up. They had only been able to goggle helplessly while the seven had loaded the barrows with the precious cargo. They were paralyzed, bereft of speech.

Now I ask you—who were those seven men? None other than Chao Gai, Wu Yong, Gongsun Sheng, Liu Tang and the three Ruan brothers. And the wine vendor was Bai Sheng, nicknamed Daylight Rat. And how was the wine drugged? When the buckets were carried up the ridge, they contained pure wine. After the seven finished the first bucket, Liu Tang removed the cover from the second and deliberately drank half a ladleful so as to dull the others' suspicions. Next, inside the grove, Wu Yong poured the drug into the other ladle. Then he came out and spilled it into the wine while taking a “free scoop.” As he pretended to drink, Bai Sheng grabbed the ladle and dumped the wine back in the bucket.

That was the ruse. Planned entirely by Wu Yong, it can be called “Capturing the Birthday Gifts by a Ruse.”

Yang Zhi had not drunk much, and he recovered first. Crawling to his feet, he could hardly stand. He looked at the other fourteen. Saliva was running from the corners of their mouths. None of them could move.

“You've made me lose the birthday gifts,” Yang Zhi muttered in angry despair. “How can I ever face Governor Liang again? These convoy documents are worthless now!” He tore them up. “I've become a man without a home or country. Where can I go? Better that I should die right here on this ridge!” Clutching his tunic, he staggered to the edge of the ridge and prepared to jump.

Truly, rains in the third month wash the fallen blossoms away, the last of willow tendrils the autumn frosts destroy. Yang Zhi sought death on Yellow Earth Ridge. What became of his life? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 17
The Tattooed Monk Assaults Two-Dragon Mountain Alone
With the Blue-Faced Beast He Takes Precious Pearl Monastery

How could Yang Zhi return and face Governor Liang after having lost the birthday gifts on Yellow Earth Ridge? He wanted to leap from the ridge and kill himself. But he came to his senses and halted just in time.

“My parents who bore me gave me this fine appearance and handsome physique,” he thought. “From childhood I learned all the eighteen arts of armed combat. This is no way to die. I can at least wait until I am captured, then decide.”

He gazed at his fourteen companions. They could only stare at him, unable to move. Yang Zhi swore. “It's all because you wretches wouldn't listen to me that this has happened. Now I'm involved!” He picked up his halberd that lay by the stump of a tree, buckled on his sword, and looked all around. There was nothing else that belonged to him. He sighed, and went down the ridge.

Not until the second watch did the fourteen revive. One by one, they crawled to their feet, uttering strings of lamentations.

“You didn't take Yang Zhi's good advice,” said the old steward. “You've ruined me!”

“What's done is done, old sir,” the others replied. “We'd better come to an understanding.”

“Do you have any suggestions?”

“The fault is ours. But as the old saying goes: 'When fire licks your clothes you beat it out, when there's a hornet in your tunic open it quick.' If Yang Zhi were here, we'd have nothing to say. But since he's gone, no one knows where, why not put the blame on him? We can go back and say to Governor

Liang: 'He abused and beat and cursed us all along the road, he drove us till we were too exhausted to stir another step. Yang Zhi was in cahoots with the robbers. They drugged us, bound us hand and foot, and made off with the treasure.'"

"That's an idea. We'll report the theft to the local district authorities the first thing tomorrow, and leave the two captains of the guards behind to help in the capture of the robbers. The rest of us will travel day and night till we reach the Northern Capital. We'll tell the governor what we agreed upon, and he will inform the Premier in writing and direct Jizhou Prefecture to apprehend the brigands, and that will be that."

Early the next day the steward and his company advised the Jizhou officials of the robbery. Of that we'll say no more.

We'll talk instead of Yang Zhi who, halberd in hand, gloomily left Yellow Earth Ridge. He travelled southward half the night, then rested in a grove. "I've got no money and there's no one around here I know," he brooded. "What am I going to do?"

By then the sky was just turning light, and he set out again to take advantage of the cool. After covering another twenty *li*, he stopped in front of a tavern. "If I don't have some wine," he said to himself, "I'll never be able to carry on."

He went in and sat down. The tables and benches were made of mulberry wood. Yang Zhi leaned his halberd against the wall. A woman, who was beside a stove, came over and spoke to him.

"Can I cook something for you, sir?"

"First let me have two measures of wine. Then cook me some rice. If you have meat, I'll have some of that, too. Add it up later and I'll pay the whole thing together."

The woman called a young fellow to pour the wine. She cooked the rice, fried some meat, and set them before Yang Zhi. When he finished eating, he rose, took his halberd and headed for the door.; * “You haven't paid yet,” the woman said.

“I'll pay you when come back. Just credit me for now.”

The young fellow who had poured the wine rushed after him and grabbed his arm. With one blow Yang Zhi knocked him to the ground. The woman began to wail. Yang continued on his way. He heard another voice shouting at him from behind.

“Where do you think you're going, rogue!”

He turned and saw running towards him a big bare-chested fellow, dragging a staff.

“So he's after me,” thought Yang. “Well, that's his bad luck!”

Yang halted. Still further behind was the young waiter armed with a pitchfork and two or three vassals carrying cudgels, all racing towards him at flying speed.

“If I can finish off this first one, the rest won't dare come any nearer,” he thought. Gripping his halberd, he charged forward to give combat.

The man, twirling his staff, met him head on. They fought twenty or thirty rounds. Of course the man was no match for Yang Zhi. He could only parry and dodge. The young fellow and the vassals were about to join in the fray when the staff-wielder jumped from the combat circle.

“Nobody move,” he shouted. “You, big fellow with the halberd, what's your name?”

Yang Zhi smote his chest. “It is and always has been Yang Zhi, the Blue-Faced Beast! I haven't changed my name!”

“Not Yang Zhi, military aide in the palace of the Eastern Capital?”

“How do you know I'm Military Aide Yang?”

The man cast down his staff and fell on his knees. “I have eyes but didn't recognize Mount Taishan!”

Yang raised him to his feet. “And who are you, sir?”

“I'm from the prefecture of Kaifeng, originally, and I was a pupil of Arm Instructor Lin Chong in the Imperial Guards. My name is Cao Zheng. My family have been butchers for generations. I know how to slaughter, draw sinews, cut bones, remove entrails and skin carcasses. For this reason I'm known as the Demon Carver. A rich man in my district gave me five thousand strings of cash and sent me here to Shandong to do some business for him. I lost his entire capital. After that, I couldn't go back, and I married a local country girl and moved in with her family. She's the one you saw at the stove. The boy with the pitchfork is her younger brother. When we fought just now I recognized your moves. They were the same as my teacher, Arms Instructor Lin. I knew I couldn't beat you.”

“So you were one of Lin's pupils. Your teacher was ruined by Marshal Gao, and had to take to the hills. He's in Liangshan Marsh, today.”

“I've heard that, also. I didn't know whether it was true or not. Please come to my home, Military Aide, and rest a while.”

Yang Zhi returned with Cao Zheng to the tavern. The host requested Yang to be seated. He told his wife and the young man to bow to their guest, and to bring him food and wine.

While they were drinking, Cao Zheng asked: “What brings you here, Military Aide?”

Yang related in detail how he lost the birthday gifts he was convoying for Governor Liang.

“In that case, why not remain with me for a time?” Cao Zheng proposed. “Then we can discuss what to do.”

“That's very kind of you,” said Yang. “But the police are liable to catch up with me. I'd better not stay too long.”

“Where can you go?”

“I was thinking of going to Liangshan Marsh and joining your teacher Arms Instructor Lin. I passed there once, and ran into him as he was coming down the mountain. The two of us fought. Wang Lun saw that we were evenly matched, and invited us both to the mountain stronghold. That's how I got to know your teacher, Lin Chong. Wang Lun pleaded with me to stay, but I didn't want to become an outlaw. I'm not going to look very gallant if I join him now, when I have the tattoo of the criminal on my face. That's why I've been hesitating. I can't make up my mind.”

“You've got something there. I've heard what a narrow-hearted knave that Wang Lun is. He doesn't know how to treat talented people. They say when Lin Chong first went up the mountain he had to take a lot of abuse from him. If my place won't do, not far from here, on Two-Dragon Mountain in Qingzhou Prefecture, is a monastery known as the Precious Pearl. It's nestled in the mountains and has only one path leading to it. The monk in charge has given up religious life and let his hair grow. All the other monks have done the same. It's said that he's formed a gang of four or five hundred robbers. His name is Deng Long, and he's known as the Golden-Eyed Tiger. If you're determined to become an outlaw, you might do well to join him.”

“Since there is such a place, why shouldn't I take it over and make it my refuge?”

Yang Zhi spent the night at Cao Zheng's house. The next morning he borrowed some travelling money, picked up his halberd, bid farewell to his host, and set out for Two-Dragon Mountain.

He travelled all day. Towards evening, he came in sight of a high mountain. “I'll sleep in this grove tonight,” he said to himself, “and climb up tomorrow.”

When he entered the grove he received a shock. Seated in the cool of a pine was a big fat monk, stripped to the buff. His back was elaborately tattooed.

The monk, on seeing Yang Zhi, grabbed a staff that was beneath the tree and leaped to his feet.

“Hey, prick,” he shouted. “Where are you from?”

“He has a west of the Pass accent,” thought Yang Zhi. “We're from the same part of the country. I'll ask him.” Aloud, he called: “Tell me where you're from, monk.”

Instead of replying, the monk came charging forward, twirling his staff.

“That surly bald pate!” Yang swore under his breath. “I'll let out some of my anger on his hide!”

He rushed at his foe, halberd in hand. They battled up and down the grove, man to man, until they had fought forty or fifty rounds, with neither the victor. The monk executed a feint and jumped from the combat circle.

“Rest!” he roared. Both men stayed their hands.

“Where was there ever such a monk?” Yang said to himself admiringly. “He's really good. His skill is terrific! I can just barely outfight him.”

“You blue-faced fellow,” yelled the monk. “Who are you?”

“I am Yang Zhi, a military aide from the Eastern Capital.”

“The one who was selling his sword and killed that loafer Niu Er?”

“Don't you see the tattoo on my face?”

The monk laughed. “Who would have thought we'd meet here!”

“May I presume to ask your name, sir monk? How did you know about my selling my sword?”

“I used to be a major in the Yenan garrison under Old General Zhong. Then I killed the Lord of the West with three blows of my fist and had to shave

my head and become a monk on Mount Wutai. Because of the decorations on my back, everyone calls me the Tattooed Monk Sagacious Lu."

Yang Zhi smiled. "So we're both natives of the same place. I've heard a lot about you in the fraternity of gallant men. But I thought you were at the Great Xiangguo Monastery. What are you doing here?"

"It's a long story. When I was in charge of the monastery's vegetable garden, Marshal Gao wanted to have Lin Chong killed. I wouldn't stand for such injustice. I went with Lin all the way to Cangzhou, and saved his life. The two escorts went back and reported to that lout Gao that Sagacious Lu of the Great Xiangguo Monastery had rescued Lin just as they were about to murder him in Wild Boar Forest and had gone with them right up to Cangzhou, and that was why they couldn't finish him off. The mother-raper was furious. He made the abbot dismiss me and was sending men to arrest me. But I was tipped off by a gang of rascals and was able to foil the rogue. I burned down the vegetable garden buildings and took to the road, but nowhere could I find a refuge.

"In Mengzhou Prefecture I stopped at a tavern in Crossroads Rise and was nearly done in by the tavern keeper's wife. She drugged my wine and I collapsed in a stupor. Luckily, her husband came home early. He was amazed at my appearance, my staff and my sword, and quickly gave me a drink that revived me. After I told him my name he kept me at his house for several days and made me his sworn brother. He and his wife are famous in the gallant fraternity. He is known as Zhang Qing the Vegetable Gardener. She is Sun the Witch. Both are considerate and bold."

"After four or five days at their place I heard that I would be safe in the Precious Pearl Monastery on Two-Dragon Mountain, and I went there, intending to join Deng Long's band. But the wretch wouldn't have me. I fought him, and he saw he was no match for me, so he fled up the mountain, closing and bolting the three big gates at its foot. There is no other way up. No matter how I cursed the prick he wouldn't come down and fight. I was stymied and enraged, and then you, brother, came along!"

Yang Zhi was very pleased. The two bowed to each other there in the grove and sat together the entire night. Yang told in detail how he tried to sell his

sword and killed Niu Er, and how he lost the birthday gifts. He related also what Cao Zheng had said.

“Here we are, but Deng Long has closed the gates. How can we get him to come down?” mused Yang. “Let's go to Cao Zheng's house and talk it over.”

The two left the grove together and returned to the tavern. Yang Zhi introduced Sagacious Lu. Cao Zheng hastily poured out wine, and they discussed how to take Two-Dragon Mountain.

“If he's really shut the gates,” said the tavern keeper, “an army of ten thousand couldn't get up there, to say nothing of just you two. The stronghold can only be conquered by guile, not by force.”

“That prick,” said Sagacious. “When I went to join him, he met me outside the gates. Because he refused to keep me, we fought, and I floored him with a kick in the groin. Before I could kill him, his gang hauled him up the mountain and locked the frigging gates. No matter how I cursed him, he wouldn't come down and fight!”

“Since it's such a good place,” said Yang Zhi, “why don't you and I go all-out and take it?”

“We must have a plan for getting up there, first,” said Lu, “or we won't be able to come to grips with him.”

“I have an idea, but I don't know whether you two will approve,” said Cao Zheng.

“Let's hear it,” said Yang.

“You, Military Aide, will have to change your clothes, and dress like a local peasant. I will take the staff and sword of the reverend, here. My wife's younger brother and few stalwarts will go with us to the foot of the mountain, and there we'll bind the reverend. I'll attend to that personally, using nothing but slip-knots. Then I'll shout up and say: 'We're from the neighboring tavern. This monk drank so much he got tipsy, but he refused

to pay. He kept muttering that he was going to muster his men and attack your stronghold. We took advantage of his drunkenness to tie him up and present him to your chieftain.'

“Those clods will certainly let us up the mountain. When we get into the stronghold and are brought before Deng Long, the reverend can slip his bonds and I will hand him his staff. Once you two good fellows get to work, Deng Long will be finished. With him out of the way, his underlings won't dare resist. What do you think of my idea?”

“Shrewd, shrewd,” said Lu and Yang.

That night all ate and drank and prepared dry rations for the coming expedition. They rose at the fifth watch the following morning and ate their fill. Lu stored his pack and luggage in Cao's house. Then the three men, plus the wife's younger brother and six or seven peasants set out for Two-Dragon Mountain. They reached the grove after noon and changed their clothes. Sagacious Lu was bound tightly by two of the peasants, but the knots were false. Yang put on a straw sun hat and a tattered cloth shirt. He retained his halberd, but held it shaft forward. Cao Zheng carried the monk's staff. The others, who walked closely front and rear, were armed with cudgels.

They halted outside the first gate. It was bristling with bows and lime flagons and ballista stones. When the guards at the gate saw the trussed-up monk, they sent a messenger flying to the summit to report.

Not long after, two junior officers came down to the gate and demanded: “Who are you people? What do you want here? Where did you get that monk?”

“We're from that village below. I run a small tavern,” Cao Zheng replied. “This fat monk came and drank himself silly, and then refused to pay. He kept saying: 'I'm going to get a thousand men from Liangshan Marsh and blast that Two-Dragon Mountain, and wipe out this village of yours too!' I plied him with good wine until he was dead drunk, and then tied the rogue up and brought him here to hand over to your chieftain as a token of our filial respect. It will save our village from disaster.”

The junior officers were delighted. “Excellent,” they said. “Just wait here a little.” They returned to the stronghold and reported that the monk had been captured.

Deng Long was overjoyed. “Bring him up,” he cried. “I'll eat the scoundrel's heart and liver with my wine to slake a bit of my hatred!”

The brigands were ordered to open the gates and send up the prisoner. Yang Zhi and Cao Zheng, escorting the bound Sagacious Lu, climbed the trail. With its three gates at three perilous passes, the stronghold was a formidable place. Wrapped in the embrace of tall peaks was the monastery. Only a single path wound between the majestic heights. The three gates were guarded by throwing-logs and ballista stones, powerful bows and sharp arrows, and a dense proliferation of bamboo spears.

After passing through the three gates, they came to the Precious Pearl Monastery. A three-doored temple stood on a mirror-smooth clearing, all enclosed in a strong wooden palisade. Seven outlaws stood at the entry arch before the building. They swore when they saw Sagacious Lu.

“You hurt our chieftain, you scabby donkey! Now, you've been taken and he's going to cut you slowly to bits!”

Lu didn't utter a sound as they brought him into the temple. The idol had been removed from its pedestal and replaced by an armchair covered by a tiger skin. Spear-carrying guards stood on either side.

A few minutes later Deng Long entered, supported by two bandits, and seated himself on his throne. Cao Zheng and Yang Zhi pushed Sagacious Lu forward to the foot of the pedestal.

“Wretch!” cried Deng Long. “The other day you knocked me down! My groin is still swollen and black and blue. Today it's my turn!”

Lu glared at him. “Prick! Don't try to get away!”

The two peasants yanked the rope and the slip-knots vanished. Lu took his staff from Cao Zheng and whirled it like a flurry of clouds. Yang Zhi,

casting aside his sun hat, turned his halberd point forward and grasped its shaft. Cao Zheng brandished a cudgel. Together, the group charged.

Deng Long struggled to escape, but Lu's staff swiftly split his skull and pulverized the throne. Yang Zhi ran his halberd through four or five of the bandits.

“Surrender, all of you!” yelled Cao Zheng. “If you don't we'll kill every last one of you!”

The five or six hundred brigands before and behind the monastery and the handful of junior officers were frightened stiff. They all submitted. Men were directed to carry Deng Long's body to the rear of the mountain and bum it. An inventory was taken of the food supplies, the building were set in order, and an inspection was made of the items stored in the back of the monastery. Then meat and wine were called for. Lu and Yang became the stronghold's leaders, and they feasted in celebration. The bandits, who all swore fealty, remained under the direct control of the junior officers.

Cao Zheng bid farewell to the two bold fellows and returned home with the peasants. Of them we'll say no more.

We'll talk rather of the old steward and the soldiers who had convoyed the birthday gifts. They travelled daily from dawn to dusk until they reached the Northern Capital. They reported directly to Governor Liang at his mansion. Kneeling before him, they confessed their criminal blunder.

“You've had a hard time on the road. I'm thankful to you,” said Liang. And he asked: “Where is Major Yang Zhi?”

“He's unspeakable!” they cried. “An audacious, ungrateful thief! Five or six days after we left here, we arrived at Yellow Earth Ridge. It was very hot, and we rested in the cool of a grove. Who would have believed that Yang Zhi was in league with seven robbers, disguised as date merchants! He had arranged to meet them, and they were waiting there in the grove with seven laden carts. He also had a fellow carrying wine come and rest on the ridge. We bought wine from him, but it was drugged, and we fell down in a stupor. Then they tied us up, and Yang and the seven robbers loaded the birthday

gifts onto the carts, together with their luggage, and trundled them all away! We reported the crime to Jizhou Prefecture and left the two captains to help the authorities apprehend the culprits. The rest of us hurried day and night to report back to Your Excellency."

Liang was shocked. "That thieving exile! A convicted felon who thanks to my efforts was raised to respectability! How could he be such an ingrate! If I ever get hold of him I'll smash him to bits!"

He had his scribe write a document which he immediately dispatched to Jizhou. He also sent an urgent letter to his father-in-law, the Premier in the Eastern Capital, relating what had transpired.

We'll not speak of the messenger to Jizhou, but rather of the emissary to the Eastern Capital. He was received by the Premier and presented the letter. Cai read it, aghast.

"What brash devils those robbers are!" he exclaimed. "Last year they stole the birthday gifts my son-in-law sent me, and they haven't been caught to this day. Now they've robbed me again. Something must be done or we'll never be able to maintain order!"

He issued a directive and dispatched an officer of his court to deliver it, at all possible speed, to the prefect of Jizhou, calling for the immediate arrest of the culprits, and demanding of formal reply.

For some days the prefect had been despondently mulling over the order he had received from Governor Liang of Darning, the Northern Capital. Now, the gate-keeper came in and announced: "An officer from Premier Cai of the Eastern Capital is here with an urgent directive for Your Excellency."

The prefect was startled. "It must be about the birthday gifts," he thought. He hastily summoned court and received the officer. "I've already been notified by Governor Liang's stewards," he said, "and have sent my police to apprehend the criminals. But we haven't discovered a trace. A few days ago, the governor made another query, and I again sent my police out with strict orders to investigate and arrest, but so far they haven't caught them. I'll reply personally to the Premier the moment we hear anything."

“I'm very close to the Premier,” the officer said. “He sent me here specially to make sure we get them. Just before I left, he told me that I was to stay here until you've apprehended every one of them—the seven date merchants, the wine seller, and the fugitive officer Yang Zhi. He set a time limit of ten days within which to arrest and deliver them to the Eastern Capital. If you fail to do so, I'm afraid you'll be sent into exile on the remote Shamen Island! It will also be difficult for me to return to the Premier's presence, in fact my life will be in jeopardy. If Your Excellency doesn't believe me, please read this order.”

The prefect was greatly alarmed after reading the document. He immediately summoned his police officials. A man came forward and hailed him respectfully.

“Who are you?” asked the prefect..

“Ho Tao, police inspector of third district.”

“Are you in charge of that robbery of the birthday gifts on Yellow Earth Ridge?”

“Yes, Your Excellency. I've been working on the case day and night. I sent our quickest and most sharp-eyed men to the ridge to search. But although I've had them beaten several times, they still haven't found a trace. We're doing our best, Excellency, but it looks hopeless.”

“Rot! 'If the superiors don't press, the underlings loaf.' I started my career by passing the palace examinations. Becoming a prefect wasn't easy! And now the Premier in the Eastern Capital has sent an officer with an order giving me ten days to catch the robbers, on pain of dismissal and exile to Shamen Island. You're a police inspector, but you're not trying, and the disaster falls on my head! I'm going to exile you to a miserable border garrison, so far that even the wild geese can't reach it!”

The prefect sent for the tattooer and had him write on Ho Tao's cheek: “Exiled to—prefecture,” leaving the name of the destination blank.

“If you don't catch those crooks,” he warned, “you can expect no mercy!”

Ho Tao left the prefect's court and returned to his station. He immediately called most of his police to a private room for a conference. They all sat looking at one another, as silent as geese with arrow-pierced bills, as mute as gill-hooked fish.

“This is the room that I pay you in,” said Ho Tao. “You're not generally so quiet. Is it because we're having a hard time solving this case? I'm the one who should be pitied. Don't you see what's written on my face?”

“We're not blocks of wood,” said the policemen. “We know you're being pressured from above. It's just that those date merchants must be brigands from some stronghold deep in the mountains in another prefecture. Once they snatched the booty, they surely holed up to celebrate and revel. How can we catch them? Even if we knew where they were, we could only gaze at them from a distance.”

Ho Tao had been five-tenths depressed to start with. Now, these words added another five-tenths. He left the station, mounted his horse, rode home, and tied the beast to the trough in the rear of the house. Then he sat and brooded.

“Why are you so dejected?” his wife asked.

“You don't know what's happened,” said Ho Tao. “The other day His Excellency issued an order to capture the robbers who stole the eleven loads of birthday gifts Governor Liang was sending his father-in-law Premier Cai. It happened on Yellow Earth Ridge. We don't know who the culprits are and I still haven't caught them. Today, I went to ask for more time, and found that the Premier had sent an officer to wait here for the criminals and bring them back to the Eastern Capital. The prefect asked me about the case and I said: 'There isn't any news, and we haven't caught them yet.' He had an exile tattoo put on my face, leaving only the destination blank. There's no telling how much longer I have to live!”

“What are we going to do?” cried his wife. “This is awful!”

As they were talking, Ho Tao's younger brother, Ho Qing, came to see him.

“What do you want?” Ho Tao demanded. “Why aren't you out gambling? What are you doing here?”

The wife, a clever woman, quickly signalled the young man not to reply, and said: “Won't you come into the kitchen? There's something I want to talk to you about.”

Ho Qing went with her into the kitchen and sat down. She served him meat and vegetables, and heated several cups of wine.

“Brother is too overbearing,” he complained. “I may have faults, but I'm still his brother! Why is he so high and mighty? He's my brother, isn't he? Would it disgrace him to have a couple of drinks with me?”

“You've no idea how upset he is.”

“He's always had plenty of money and goods. What's happened to them? And I haven't been around to bother him. Why should he be upset?”

“You don't know. The other day on Yellow Earth Ridge a gang of date merchants robbed the birthday gifts Governor Liang of the Northern Capital was sending to Premier Cai. The prefect of Jizhou has just received an order from Cai to arrest the robbers within ten days and deliver them to the capital. If he doesn't, he'll be exiled to a distant garrison. Didn't you see what the prefect had tattooed on your brother's face: 'Exiled to—prefecture'? Only the destination has been left blank. If he doesn't catch them soon, he's going to suffer. How can he think of drinking with you? That's why I prepared some food and wine for you in here. He's been very depressed. You mustn't blame him.”

“I've heard some rumors that robbers have taken the birthday gifts. Where did it happen?”

“They say it was on Yellow Earth Ridge.”

“And what kind of people were the robbers?”

“Brother, you're not drunk. I just told you—seven date merchants.”

Ho Qing laughed. “So that's how it was. Since it's known that date merchants did the job. What's there to brood over? Why not just send a few capable men to arrest them?”

“That's easy to say. They can't be found.”

“There's nothing to worry about, sister-in-law,” Ho Qing smiled. “Brother always welcomes a lot of fair weather friends, but he has no use for his own kin. He's looking for robbers, and his cronies say they can't find them. If he'd drunk a few cups of wine with me from time to time, I might be able to tell him how to go about it.”

“Do you really have any clues?”

Ho Qing laughed. “Wait till brother's situation is desperate, then I may have a plan to save him.”

He rose to leave. His sister-in-law persuaded him to stay for another few cups of wine.

Meanwhile she hurried into the next room and told her husband. Ho Tao quickly invited his brother to join him.

“Since you know where the robbers have gone,” he said with an apologetic smile, “why don't you rescue me?”

“I don't know anything. I was only joking with sister-in-law. How can I rescue you?”

“Good brother, don't be offended by my manner. Think of how good I am to you generally, not of how bad I am on occasion. Save my life!”

“But you have so many sharp-eyed, fast-moving police. There are nearly three hundred men under your command. Aren't they doing their utmost? What can a mere younger brother do?”

“Never mind about them. You've got something up your sleeve. Don't wait for others to be the heroes. Tell me where the robbers have gone and I'll reward you. Let me relax.”

“How do I know where they've gone?”

“Don't torment me. Remember we were born of the same mother!”

“No need to panic. When the situation gets really critical, I'll go out and nab the petty culprits myself.”

“Ho Qing,” said his sister-in-law, “you must rescue him, come what may. It's your duty as a brother. The Premier has issued an order for the arrest of the gang. It's very serious. How can you talk about 'petty culprits'!”

“You know I come only for money for gambling, sister-in-law,” Ho Qing said ironically. “Many's the time brother has berated me. Even when he struck or cursed me, I never talked back. And when he feasted, it was always with others. But today I seem to be of some use after all!”

Ho Tao realized there was reason in what Ho Qing said. He hurriedly got a silver ingot weighing ten ounces and placed it on the table. “Take this, brother,” he urged. “After we catch the robbers, I guarantee you won't lack for gold or silver, silks or satins.”

Ho Qing laughed. “This is certainly a case of 'not burning incense in ordinary times, but embracing the idol's foot in a crisis.' It would be sheer extortion if I accepted your silver now. Take it back. Don't try to bribe me. If you act like this I won't say a word. I'll tell you only because you two have apologized. I'm not impressed by your money.”

“My silver is all rewards for cases I've solved,” explained Ho Tao. “Naturally, I've always four or five hundred strings of cash on hand. Don't refuse the silver, brother, and tell me—where have those robbers gone?”

Ho Qing slapped his thigh. “I've got them right here in my pocket!”

Ho Tao was astonished. “What do you mean?”

“Never you mind. Just take my word for it. I don't want your silver. You don't have to bribe me. I ask only that you treat me decently.”

Then Ho Qing calmly related what he knew.

And as a result, a gallant hero emerged in Yuncheng County, and in Liangshan Marsh there gathered a Heaven-shaking assemblage of courageous men. Who were the persons of whom Ho Qing spoke? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 18
Song Jiang Secretly Helps Ward Chief Chao Flee
Beautiful Beard Cleverly Fools the Winged Tiger

Inspector Ho continued to urge his younger brother to tell what he knew. From a document case at his waist Ho Qing extracted a notebook.

“All the robbers are written down right here!”

“How can that be?”

“To tell the truth, a few days ago I lost again at gambling. I was clean, without a copper. A gambling pal of mine took me to a village called Anle, fifteen *li* outside the North Gate, and I put up at the Wang Family Inn, where I was able to raise a bit of change for the gaming tables. The authorities have issued an order that all inns must keep a register, with proper seals, and that an entry must be made for every guest, stating his name, place of origin, destination, and line of business, and that it must be shown to the local ward chief on demand, once a month. The attendant at the Wang Family Inn is illiterate, and he begged me to keep the register for him for a couple of weeks.

“On the third day of the sixth month, seven date merchants arrived pushing seven carts. I recognized one of them as Ward Chief Chao of East Bank in Yuncheng County, because I once stayed at his manor with a gambling friend. I took up my brush-pen and asked: 'What is your name, please?' Before he could speak, a fair-faced man with a mustache and goatee quickly answered for him: 'We're all of us named Li. We're from Haozhou Prefecture, and are on our way with dates for the Eastern Capital.'

“Though I was sceptical, I wrote it down. The next day, they left. My host offered to take me gambling in a place in the village. On the way, at a fork in the road, we met a fellow carrying buckets on a shoulder-pole. I didn't

know him, but the innkeeper hailed him: 'Where are you going, Master Bai?' 'To a rich man's house in the village. I'm bringing him this load of vinegar,' the man replied. The innkeeper said to me: 'This is Bai Sheng, known as the Daylight Rat. He's also fond of gambling.' I made a mental note of it. Later, when I heard gossip that date merchants had drugged some travellers on Yellow Earth Ridge and stole the birthday gifts, I guessed at once that Ward Chief Chao was involved. Arrest Bai and question him, and you'll get the whole story. Here is my copy of the register."

Ho Tao was delighted. He led his brother in to see the prefect.

"Any developments on that case?" asked the official.

"Some," replied Ho Tao.

The prefect called them into his rear chambers and questioned them carefully. Ho Qing responded in detail. The prefect directed eight policemen to go with the brothers that same night to Anle Village. They compelled the innkeeper to take them to Bai Sheng, and reached the wine seller's house at the third watch. The innkeeper, at their insistence, called Bai Sheng to open the door and strike a light. Bai's wife led them in. They heard Bai Sheng groaning on the bed. The wife said he had a fever but had not been able to sweat. They hauled him from the bed and tied him up. His face was blotched red and white.

"That's a fine thing you did on Yellow Earth Ridge!" they yelled.

Bai Sheng denied everything. They bound his wife, but she also refused to talk. The policemen searched the house. They noticed that the earthen floor beneath the bed was uneven, and started to dig. At a depth of three feet, one of them uttered a cry. Bai Sheng's face turned the color of clay. From the hole in the ground, the diggers extracted a bag of gold and silver.

The police concealed Bai Sheng's head and face in a hood, and took him and his wife and the loot back to Jizhou. It was the fifth watch and the sky was already light when they reached the prefectural office. They brought him before the prefect, tied the ropes around him more securely, and asked him who the brains was behind the robbery. Bai Sheng denied any

connection, and refused to name his confederates. They beat him three or four times, till his skin split and blood was pouring from his wounds.

“We already know that the chief culprit is Ward Chief Chao of East Bank, Yuncheng County,” shouted the prefect. “There's no use denying it. Name the other six and I'll stop the beating.”

Bai Sheng tried to hold out. But soon he couldn't take it any longer. “The leader is Ward Chief Chao,” he admitted. “He came with six men and inveigled me into carrying the wine! But I really don't know who the other six are!”

“That's no problem,” said the prefect. “All we have to do is take Ward Chief Chao, and we'll find the rest quickly enough.”

A twenty-catty rack for condemned criminals was locked around Bai Sheng's neck. His wife, also fettered, was sent to the women's prison. The prefect then issued an order directing Ho Tao to proceed at once with twenty crack policemen to Yuncheng County and request the magistrate to aid in arresting Ward Chief Chao and his six un-named fellow conspirators. Inspector Ho was told to take along the two captains who had accompanied the birthday gift convoy to identify the culprits. But, warned the prefect, he was to proceed quietly and not let news of the raid leak out.

The inspector and his men travelled all night to Yuncheng. First Ho Tao secretly put up his party at an inn. Then, with two of his policemen and the prefect's order, he presented himself at the gate of the magistrate's compound.

By then it was late morning, and court was in recess. All was still. Ho Tao went into a tea-house across the street and sat down to wait. As he was sipping some steeped tea he had ordered he asked the waiter: “Why is it so quiet outside the magistracy?”

“The morning session is over. The attendants and litigants have all gone off to eat. They haven't come back yet.”

“Do you happen to know which clerk is on duty today?”

“Here he comes, now,” said the waiter, pointing.

Ho Tao looked. Emerging from the magistracy was a man whose family name was Song. His formal given name was Jiang, his popular given name was Kongming. A third son, he was born in the county's Song Family Village. Because he was short and swarthy, everyone called him Dark Song Jiang. And since he was filial to his parents, and was a chivalrous man, generous to friends, he was also known as the Filial and Gallant Dark Third Master. Above him, his father was still alive, though his mother had died early. Below him was a younger brother Song Jing, known as the Iron Fan who, with their father, the Venerable Song, ran the farm in the village and lived on the fruits of their fields.

Song Jiang was a clerk of the county magistrate's court in Yuncheng. He wrote legibly and well, and was familiar with administrative procedures. Especially fond of playing with weapons, he was adept at many forms of fighting. He made friends only in the gallant fraternity, but he helped anyone, high or low, who sought his aid, providing his guest with food and lodging in the family manor, tirelessly keeping him company, and giving him travelling expenses when he wanted to leave. Song Jiang scattered gold about like dust! He never refused a request for money. He was always making things easy for people, solving their difficulties, settling differences, saving lives. He provided the indigent with funds for coffins and medicines, gave charity to the poor, assisted in emergencies, helped in cases of hardship.

And so he was famed throughout the provinces of Shandong and Hebei, and was known to all as the Timely Rain, for like the rain from the heavens he brought succor to every living thing.

As Song Jiang walked from the magistracy with an attendant, Inspector Ho crossed the street to meet him.

“Won't you join me for some tea, sir Clerk?”

Song Jiang could tell from his appearance that Ho Tao was in the police.

“Where are you from, brother?” he queried courteously.

“If I may have the pleasure of your company in the tea-house we can talk there.”

“As you wish, sir.”

The two men entered the tea-house and sat down. Song Jiang told the attendant to wait outside. Then he turned to the inspector.

“May I presume to ask brother's name?”

“I am Ho Tao, a mere police inspector of Jizhou Prefecture. May I dare ask your name, sir Clerk?”

“Forgive me for not having recognized you, Inspector. I'm a small official called Song Jiang.”

Ho Tao fell to his knees and kowtowed. “I have long known your fame, but never had the honor of meeting you.”

“You overwhelm me. Please sit at the head of the table.”

“An insignificant person like me—I wouldn't dream of it!

“As a member-of our superior organization and a guest from afar, you must, Inspector.”

They argued politely for a few moments. Then Song Jiang took the host's seat and Ho Tao the guest's.

“Waiter,” called the clerk, “two cups of tea.” The refreshments soon came and both men drank.

“What instructions from above do you bring to our humble county, Inspector?” asked Song Jiang.

“I'll speak frankly. It concerns several important people here.”

“It couldn't be about a robbery?”

“I've brought a sealed order. I trust you will help me carry it out.”

“How could I do otherwise with an emissary from our superiors? Which robbery does it involve?”

“You're the keeper of the official records, sir Clerk. There's no harm in telling you. On Yellow Earth Ridge, which is under our prefect's jurisdiction, a band of eight robbers drugged fifteen men who were bringing birthday gifts from Governor Liang of Darning, the Northern Capital, to Premier Cai and made off with eleven loads of gold and jewels of an estimated value of a hundred thousand strings of cash. We've caught Bai Sheng, the accomplice. He says the other seven, the actual robbers, are all in this county. The Premier has sent an aide to our prefecture with orders to remain until we've caught them. We hope you'll give us every assistance.”

“Of course we'll apprehend the criminals and turn them over. We'd do that on your orders, Inspector, to say nothing of orders from the Premier himself. Who are the seven named by Bai Sheng?”

“The leader is Ward Chief Chao of East Bank. To tell you the truth, we don't know the names of the other six. We beg your utmost diligence.”

Song Jiang was shocked. He said to himself: “Chao Gai is one of my dearest friends! This crime he's committed is a capital offense! I must save him. If they capture him he's sure to die!”

Concealing his anxiety, Song Jiang said: “That dirty scoundrel. Everyone in the county hates him. So now he's come to this. We'll make him pay!”

“Please help us apprehend him.”

“There won't be any difficulty. 'Easy as catching turtles in a jug. Just stretch out your hand,' as the old saying goes. But you'll have to present your order to the magistrate when the court is in session. He will read it and send men to make the arrest. I'm only a clerk. I couldn't assume responsibility for an important matter like this. What if word leaked out!”

“You're quite right. Please lead me in.”

“The magistrate has been busy all morning and he's taking a short rest. If you'll wait a bit, court will be resumed soon. I'll call you.”

“I hope you'll help us accomplish our mission, come what may.”

“Naturally. That goes without saying. I must go home to attend to a few things. I'll be right back. Please sit and rest a while.”

“Go ahead, sir Clerk. I'll wait here for you.”

Song Jiang rose and left the booth. “If that gentleman wants any more tea, put it on my account,” he said to the waiter. He hurried from the teahouse and told his attendant to remain outside the door. “When the magistrate resumes court, go into the tea-house and tell the officer I'll be back soon,” he instructed. “Ask him to please wait a bit.”

At his house, Song Jiang saddled his horse and led it out the rear gate. Quirt in hand, he mounted and walked the beast slowly from the county town. Once outside the East Gate, he struck the horse sharply twice with his quirt, and the animal scooted like a rabbit towards East Bank. In less than half a watch Song arrived at Chao Gai's manor. When a vassal saw who it was, he went in and reported.

Chao Gai was drinking wine with Wu Yong, Gongsun Sheng and Liu Tang beneath a grape arbor in the rear garden. The three Ruan brothers had received their share of the loot and returned to Stone Tablet Village. The vassal announced that Clerk Song was at the front gate.

“How many people with him?” asked Chao Gai.

“He's alone, and his horse is in a lather,” replied the vassal. “He wants to see you at once.”

“Something must be up.” Chao Gai hastened out.

Song Jiang hailed the ward chief respectfully, grasped him by the hand and walked to a small building nearby.

“Why have you come in such a hurry, sir Clerk?”

“You know my devotion, brother. I'd lay down my life for you. They've broken the Yellow Earth Ridge case! Bai Sheng has been taken to the prison in Jizhou. He's confessed about you seven. The prefect has sent an Inspector Ho and several men, with orders both from himself and Premier Cai that all seven be apprehended, and naming you as the leader. Thank Heaven the matter fell into my hands! I put the inspector off by saying the magistrate was sleeping, and told him to wait for me in the teahouse opposite the court. Then I came galloping out here to warn you. 'Of all the thirty-six possible solutions, the best one is— leave.' Get out, quickly! Don't delay! I'm going back now to take the inspector and his documents into court. The magistrate will send men this very night. You mustn't delay. If anything goes wrong, I'll be helpless. Don't blame me if I can't save you!”

“Brother,” said the startled Chao Gai. “I'll never be able to thank you enough.”

“Save your breath. Just concentrate on getting away. Don't linger. I must go back.”

“There are seven of us. The three Ruan brothers—Second, Fifth and Seventh—have returned to Stone Tablet Village with their share. The other three are here. You must meet them.” Chao Gai led Song Jiang to the rear garden and introduced him.

“Wu Yong. Gaongsun Sheng, from Jizhou. Liu Tang, from Dounglu.”

Song Jiang exchanged a few brief courtesies and turned to leave. “Look after yourself, brother,” he urged the ward chief. “Get away quickly. I'm going now.” He mounted his horse at the front gate, flailed his quirt, and flew back to the county town.

“Do you know who that was?” Chao Gai asked his three companions.

“What was he in such a hurry about?” countered Wu Yong. “Who is he?”

“This will surprise you, but if he hadn't come all of us would be dead.

“Does that mean there's been a leak and our story's got out?” cried the three.

“That brother came to warn us, at the greatest risk to himself. Bai Sheng has been arrested. He's in Jizhou Prison, and he's named the seven of us! The prefect has sent an Inspector Ho and some men, together with a special order from the Premier, to request Yuncheng County to apprehend us immediately. Fortunately, my friend kept the inspector waiting in a tea-house while he rushed out here. When he gets back the magistrate will issue his orders and send men this very night to arrest us. What shall we do?”

“If he hadn't informed us, we'd all be in the net,” said Wu Yong. “Who is our benefactor?”

“A clerk in the magistrate's court, Song Jiang, Defender of Chivalry.”

“I've heard of him, but we've never met, though we live not far apart.”

The other two asked: “Isn't he the one known among chivalrous men as Song Jiang the Timely Rain?”

Chao Gai nodded. “That's the man. He and I are very close, we're sworn brothers. Teacher Wu hasn't met him, but I can assure you he's worthy of his reputation. Since I became his blood brother I feel that my life hasn't been lived in vain!”

To Wu Yong he said: “Our situation is critical. How can we solve it?”

“There's nothing to discuss. 'Of all the thirty-six possible solutions, the best one is—leave.'”

“That's what Clerk Song said. But where should we go?”

“I'm considering that. I'd say we should get together six or seven shoulder-pole loads of possessions and join the three Ruan brothers in Stone Tablet. First send a man on ahead quietly to let them know we're coming.”

“But they're fishermen. How can they accommodate so many of us?”

“You're not thinking carefully, brother. Stone Tablet Village is only a few steps away from Liangshan Marsh. The citadel on the mountain top is thriving. When the officials and police go looking for robbers, they don't

dare even glance in its direction. If the search for us gets too hot, we can always join the band."

"A very good idea. But what if they don't want us?"

"We've plenty of gold and silver. If we present them with some they'll accept us all right."

"Since we're all agreed, we'd better get started. Teacher Wu, you and Liu Tang take several vassals and a few loads and go first to the Ruan family and arrange everything. Have them meet us. We'll be coming by land. I and Gongsun will join you as soon as we've settled things here."

Wu Yong and Liu Tang made up the purloined birthday gifts of gold and jewels into half a dozen loads, and directed six vassals to eat a meal. Then, the teacher tucked his bronze chain into his sleeve, Liu Tang took up his halberd, and the group set out for Stone Tablet, shouldering the loads.

The ward chief and the Taoist priest began closing down the manor. They gave money to those vassals who didn't want to go along, and advised them to find other masters. Those who wished to go gathered their possessions and prepared their luggage. Of that we'll say no more.

We'll speak rather of Song Jiang, who galloped back to town and hurried to the tea-house. Inspector Ho was standing outside the door, looking for him.

"Sorry to keep you waiting so long," said the clerk. "A relative from my village kept me tied up talking about family affairs."

"May I trouble you to take me in?"

"Please come this way."

The two men entered the magistracy, where Shi Wenbin was holding court. Song Jiang with the sealed papers in his hand, led Ho Tao to the magistrate's table, and instructed the attendants to put up a "Do Not Disturb" sign.

“Documents from Jizhou Prefecture,” he told the magistrate, “brought by Inspector Ho because of the urgency of the robbers' case.”

Shi opened the envelope and read the documents. He was shaken. “The Premier has dispatched an aide to wait in the prefecture!” he exclaimed to Song Jiang. “We must send men and catch the criminals!”

“If they go during the day, word is liable to get out. Night would be the best time. Once we take Chao Gai, we'll be able to bag the other six.”

“Chao Gai is the ward chief of East Bank and has a very good reputation. I don't understand how he could have become involved in such a business!”

The magistrate summoned his sheriff and two constables. One was called Zhu Tong, and the other Lei Heng. Both were unusual men.

After receiving instructions from the magistrate in the rear chambers, they and the sheriff got on their horses, rode to the garrison and there picked over a hundred men, including ordinary soldiers and walking and mounted archers. When night fell, they all set out with Inspector Ho and the two captains who had originally accompanied the birthday gifts. Every man carried ropes and weapons. The sheriff rode his horse, as did the two constables. They wore swords, bows and arrows, and each held a halberd. Front and rear were platoons of mounted and walking archers. They left the town through the East Gate and proceeded rapidly towards East Bank and the home of Ward Chief Chao.

It was the first watch by the time they reached the village, and they assembled in the Guanyin Temple courtyard.

“Chao Gai's manor is just ahead,” said Zhu Tong. “There are roads leading from both its front and rear gates. If we attack from the front, he'll leave by the rear. If we attack from the rear, he'll escape through the front. We must bear in mind that Chao Gai is a remarkable man. We don't know who those other six are, but they're certainly not kindly gentlemen, and they're all desperate. If they decide to fight their way out, with their vassals helping, we'll never be able to stop them. Our only hope is to shout from one

direction and attack from another, get them running around in confusion, then make our move.

“I propose that we divide our forces into two groups, with me taking one half and Constable Lei taking the other. I will go quietly with my men, on foot, to the rear gate, and lay an ambush. When you hear us whistle, Constable Lei, you and your group smash in through the front gate. Arrest every man you can lay your hands on.”

“That sounds all right,” said Lei. “Only, wouldn't it be better if you and the sheriff struck from the front gate while I cut off the rear?”

“You don't understand, brother. There are three possible escape routes from the manor. I've observed them often. I know every path. Even without torches, I could follow them in the dark. You're not familiar with all the places Chao Gai could twist in and out of. If he gets away it'll be no joke.”

“You're right, Constable Zhu,” said the sheriff. “Take half the men.”

“I'll only need about thirty,” said Zhu Tong. He picked ten archers and twenty soldiers and departed.

The sheriff again climbed into his saddle, and Lei Heng placed a protective cordon of mounted archers around him. The soldiers were ranged in front. In the light of thirty or so torches, with tined-spears and halberds and hooks, they advanced rapidly in a body towards the manor.

When only half a *li* away, suddenly they saw fire rising from the central building, spreading a thick pall of back smoke and spewing red flames into the sky. Another ten paces and they saw thirty or forty more blazes springing up everywhere around the front and rear gates.

Lei Heng waved his halberd, the soldiers behind him shouted, and they broke through the front gate in a body. Inside, the fires had turned the manor bright as day, but the attackers didn't see a single person. Then, from the rear of the manor they heard yells and shouts, and cries of “Grab them!”

Actually, it had been Zhu Tong's intention from the start to let Chao Gai escape through the rear, and so he told Lei Heng to attack from the front. Lei Heng had the same idea. He too wanted to cover the rear gate and let Chao Gai flee. He had no choice when Zhu Tong insisted that he make a frontal assault, but he only put on a show, creating a lot of noise and running about with the aim of hastening the ward chief's get-away.

By the time Zhu Tong arrived at the rear gate Chao Gai had not yet finished putting his affairs in order. Vassals hastened to report: “The soldiers have come! We must hurry!” Chao Gai ordered them to set fire to the manor. He and Gongsun the Taoist priest, at the head of a dozen or so vassals, brandishing their halberds, dashed through the rear gate. “Try to stop us and die, get out of our way and live!” they shouted.

“Halt, Ward Chief,” Zhu Tong called from the shadows. “I've been waiting here for you a long time!”

Chao Gai paid no attention. He and Gongsun continued slashing furiously with their halberds. Pretending to dodge, Zhu Tong left a hole in the besiegers' line. The ward chief sent Gongsun and the vassals plunging through, and then followed, protecting their rear.

Zhu Tong pulled his foot archers from the manor's rear gate.

“There are robbers ahead, catch them!” he yelled. Lei Heng, hearing his shouts, came out of the front gate and also ordered his mounted and foot archers to give chase in various directions. He himself rushed about in the light of the fires, pretending to seek the fugitives.

Zhu Tong got away from his men and ran after Chao Gai, halberd in hand.

“Why are you chasing me, Constable Zhu?” the ward chief called over his shoulder. “I've done no wrong.”

Zhu Tong saw there was no one behind him, and he dared to speak freely. “You don't know what I've done for you, Ward Chief, I was afraid Lei Heng would get muddled and not treat you right. So I fooled him into raiding your front gate, while I waited at the rear to ensure your escape. Didn't you

see that big breach I just made for you? Liangshan Marsh is your only safe refuge. Don't try any other place."

"I'm deeply grateful to you for rescuing us. Some day I'll repay you."

Behind them came the sound of Lei Heng shouting: "Don't let them get away!"

"There's nothing to be alarmed about," Zhu Tong said to the ward chief. "Keep going. I'll draw them off." He called back. "Three robbers are heading for the east path! After them, Constable Lei!"

Lei Heng and his men hurried east, followed by the soldiers. Zhu Tong continued talking with Chao Gai while feigning to pursue him. The fact is he was protecting the ward chief and seeing him on his way. Chao Gai finally vanished into the night. Zhu Tong pretended to trip. He fell heavily to the ground. The soldiers caught up and raised him to his feet.

"I couldn't see the path in the darkness. I ran off into the fields by mistake," said Zhu Tong. "I slipped and fell. My right ankle is sprained."

"The main culprit got away," said the sheriff. "A pretty kettle of fish!"

"It isn't that I didn't try, but there isn't much I can do in the dark of the moon," said Zhu Tong. "Most of these soldiers are useless. They're afraid to go after the robbers."

The sheriff ordered the soldiers to continue the chase. But the soldiers thought: "Those two constables weren't any use themselves. If they couldn't get close, what good can we do?" They made a desultory show of pursuit, then came back and reported: "In this darkness we can't find which path they've taken."

Lei Heng also returned after running a while. "Zhu Tong and Chao Gai are close friends," he said to himself. "He's probably let him escape. I have no reason to harm him. I also wanted to let him go. Well, now he's gone, before I could prove my good intentions."

“We hadn't a chance of catching them,” he said to the sheriff. “Those robbers are fantastic!”

It was already the fourth watch by the time the sheriff and the two constables reached the front of the manor. Inspector Ho observed the soldiers straggling in. After hunting all night they hadn't nabbed a single robber.

He groaned. “What am I going to tell the Jizhou prefect?”

All the sheriff could do was to seize a few of the ward chief's neighbors and take them back to Yuncheng County.

The magistrate hadn't slept all night, waiting for a report. What he heard was: “The criminals have escaped. We've brought in some of the neighbors.” The magistrate had them summoned, and he questioned them.

“Although we're neighbors of Ward Chief Chao,” they said, “the nearest of us are separated by a few hamlets from the manor, the furthest are two or three *li* across the fields. He often had visitors, bearing spears and staves, but we never thought he'd do this sort of thing!”

The magistrate pressed them for information, determined to unearth a clue.

“If you want to get at the truth,” said one of the closer neighbors, “why not ask his vassals?”

“Didn't they all go with him?”

“Some didn't want to go. They're still here.”

The magistrate immediately dispatched men to East Bank to apprehend the vassals, sending the neighbor along to identify them. In less than two watches they returned with two vassals. At first when questioned the vassals denied everything. But when they were beaten beyond endurance, they confessed.

“There were six of them who conferred with the ward chief,” they said. “The only one we knew was a teacher in our township named Wu Yong.

Another man is called Gongsun Sheng. He's a Taoist priest. Another is a big dark fellow named Liu. There were also three others we didn't know. Wu brought them. We heard him say. 'They're three brothers, fishermen, named Ruan, from Stone Tablet Village.' That's the whole story."

The confession was recorded, and the magistrate turned the two vassals over to Inspector Ho and wrote a detailed report to the prefect. Song Jiang made himself surety for the neighbors, and they were allowed to go home and await further instructions.

Ho Tao and his men travelled all night and returned to Jizhou with the two vassals. The prefect was holding court. Ho Tao presented himself before him with his company and related how Chao Gai had burned down the manor and escaped. He repeated the confession of the vassals.

"So that's how it was! Summon Bai Sheng again," said the magistrate. "Do the three Ruan brothers really live where these men said?" he asked him.

Bai Sheng saw that denial was useless. "Yes," he said. "They all live in Stone Tablet Second Brother is called Ferocious Giant, Fifth Brother is called Reckless Rash, and Seventh Brother is called the Devil Incarnate."

"What are the names of the other three?"

"Wu Yong the Wizard, Dragon in the Clouds Gongsun Sheng and Liu Tang the Red-Haired Demon."

"Now we're getting somewhere! Return Bai Sheng to his prison and lock him up," said the magistrate. He ordered Inspector Ho to Stone Tablet Village. "Once we take the three Ruans the case is half solved."

As a result, stars of Heavenly Spirits and Earthly Fiends gathered amid stormy clouds. In the marsh-girt fortress congregated a mighty battle host.

What ensued from Inspector Ho's raid on the village of Stone Tablet? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 19
Lin Chong Stirs Internal Strife in the Water-Girt Stronghold
Chao Gai Wins a Battle in Liangshan Marsh

On receiving the magistrate's order, Inspector Ho left the court and went with his men to a conference room.

“That Stone Tablet Village is on the edge of Liangshan Marsh. It has water and reeds and creeks all around,” said the police officers. “Without a large force of men and boats, you can forget about going in there to make an arrest.”

“True,” mused Ho Tao. He returned to the court and spoke to the prefect. “Stone Tablet is full of waterways. It's next to Liangshan Marsh. All around are deep coves and channels, reeds and grass,” Ho said. “There have always been robbers in Stone Tablet. Now they've added this gang of toughs. We'll need a strong force if we're going to take them.”

“All right,” said the prefect. “I'll give you a competent deputy and five hundred soldiers.”

Ho Tao went back to the conference room and called out his police escort. He told them to prepare a list of five hundred men and make ready all necessary arms and equipment.

The next day the deputy came to Ho Tao with the prefect's written order. Together, they assembled the five hundred soldiers. With these, plus the policemen, they set out for Stone Tablet.

Meanwhile, Chao Cai and Gongsun Sheng, after burning down the manor, arrived at Stone Tablet Village with a dozen or so vassals. They were met by the three Ruan brothers, all of them armed, and taken to the home of Fifth. Ruan the Second had already sent his mother, wife and child to a place of concealment in the marsh. The seven men discussed joining the outlaws on Mount Liangshan.

“In Lijia Entry a man by the name of Zhu Gui runs a tavern. He's known as the Dry-Land Crocodile and is very hospitable to brave fellows from all over,” said Wu Yong. “Anyone who wants to join the gang has to talk to him first. We ought to get boats, load on our belongings, send him some gifts, and ask him to introduce us.”

Just then, a few fishermen arrived and reported: “Soldiers, on horse and on foot, are closing in, fast, on our village!”

Chao Gai rose quickly to his feet. “If those knaves catch up with us we'll never get away'.”

“Don't worry,” said Second. “I'll handle them! I'll drown the majority and stab the rest!”

“Keep calm,” said Gongsun Shen. “Let me show you what this humble priest can do.”

“Brother,” Chao said to Liu Tang, “you and the teacher take our families and possessions in boats to the left side of Lijia Entry and wait there. We'll see what's up and join you later.”

Second chose two boats. He loaded his mother, wife, child and belongings on one. Wu Yong and Liu Tang boarded the other. Seven or eight fishermen rowed off with both craft to wait at Lijia Entry. Second then told Fifth and Seventh how to deal with the enemy. They were each to go in a small boat and.... The two brothers departed.

Ho Tao, the deputy and the soldiers gradually neared the village. They seized whatever boats they saw along the bank and manned them with soldiers who knew how to swim. The cavalry kept pace on shore, land and water forces moving forward abreast. They set up a shout when they reached Second's house and charged into the yard. But except for a few items of heavy furniture the place had long since been cleaned out.

“Bring me a few of his fishermen neighbors,” said Ho Tao.

The men were produced. They said: “His brothers Fifth and Seventh both live in the marsh. You can only get there by boat.”

Ho Tao discussed this with the deputy and said: “The marsh is full of creeks and inlets and twisting paths, and ponds and pools of unknown depth. If we break up into small search parties those rascals are liable to catch us in some trap. My idea is to leave the horses in the village with a guard, and all of us proceed in boats.”

This was done. Well over a hundred craft had been seized. Some were punted, some were sculled. Now the whole armada advanced in the direction of the fishermen's hamlet where Ruan the Fifth lived. After sailing five or six *li* they heard someone bawling a raucous song from a thicket of reeds. The pursuers stopped rowing and listened. The words rang clearly across the water:

In the reeds all my life I fish,

Rice and hemp I no planting do;

Rapacious officials I kill them all,

To the emperor I'm loyal and true.

Ho Tao and his men were startled. Then, far off, they saw the singer. He was sculling a small boat. One of the men recognized him.

“That's Ruan the Fifth!”

Inspector Ho waved his arm in signal, and the entire flotilla, all armed to the teeth, pressed forward after their quarry.

Fifth laughed scornfully. “How brave you corrupt officials are when it comes to oppressing the common people! What do you want with me? Be careful. Don't tweak the tiger's whiskers!”

Archers behind Ho fitted arrows to their strings, pulled the bows to the full, and let fly. Fifth picked up his sculling oar and dived into the water. When the soldiers reached his boat, he was nowhere to be seen.

Before the armada passed another two inlets, they heard a shrill whistle from the reeds. The boats quickly spread out. Ahead they saw a small craft approaching, with two men. The one standing in the bow wore a black straw hat and a green coir cape. In his hand was a spear shaped like a brush pen. He sang this song:

In Stone Tablet Village I was born,

I've always liked to kill,

Ho Tao and the deputy's heads I'll lift

And present them to the emperor as my gift.

Again Ho Tao and his men were startled. Some of them recognized the singer.

“That's Ruan the Seventh!”

“All together, in full strength,” shouted Ho Tao. “Grab that man. Don't let him get away!”

Seventh laughed. “Stinking wretches!” He pointed with his spear and his craft glided into an inlet.

Shouting at the top of their lungs, the soldiers gave chase. The craft of Seventh and the man wielding the sweep oar seemed to fly across the water. They whistled, and turned the boat into a smaller inlet. The pursuing fleet saw that the waterway was becoming narrower.

“Halt,” Ho Tao ordered. “Moor the boats by the bank.”

He went ashore and gazed around. On all sides were watery wastes and reeds. There was no sign of any path. Ho Tao hesitated. He couldn't make up his mind. He asked directions from a soldier who came from those parts.

“Although I live around here,” the man said, “there are many places I don't know.”

Inspector Ho sent out two small craft with three policemen in each to scout deeper into the reeds. Two watches passed and they failed to return.

“Those idiots don't do anything right,” Ho fumed. He dispatched another five policemen in another two boats. More than a watch went by, but these men didn't come back either.

“They're all experienced and clever. How can they act so stupid?” Ho wondered. “Why don't they send one boat back to report? And these soldiers I've brought are just as bad. They don't know up from down!”

It was already late in the day. “I won't solve anything sitting here,” thought Ho Tao. “I'd better go have a look myself.”

He selected a fast craft and went aboard with several of his best veteran policemen, each heavily armed. Plied by half a dozen oars, with Ho Tao seated in the bow peering at the expanse of reeds, the boat moved off.

The sun by then was sinking in the west. After proceeding five or six *li* up the inlet, Ho Tao saw a man approaching along one of the banks with a hoe in his hand.

“Hey, fellow. Who are you?” Ho called. “What is this place?”

“I'm a farmer from the village. This is Chop-Head Creek. It doesn't go anywhere.”

“Have you seen two boats pass this way?”

“You mean the ones after Ruan the Fifth?”

“How do you know they were chasing him?”

“They're in the dark grove ahead, fighting.”

“How far is the grove from here?”

“Only a few steps and you'll be able to see it.”

Ho Tao shouted for his men to beach the craft and hurry to the fray. He sent two men up the bank with their tined spears. Suddenly, the “farmer” raised his hoe and with two blows knocked the policemen tumbling into the creek. The astonished Ho tried to scramble up the bank. But the boat began to rock, and a man surged out of the water, yanked Ho's legs and dumped him overboard with a splash. As the other policemen in the boat rose to flee, the “farmer” leaped aboard the craft and smashed their skulls with his hoe, spattering brain matter.

The swimmer dragged Ho Tao by the legs up the bank and bound him with his sash. It was Ruan the Seventh. Second was the man who wielded the hoe. They both reviled Inspector Ho.

“We three Ruan brothers have always liked killing and burning! Compared to us you're nothing! You've got your nerve, coming with a gang of soldiers to arrest us!”

“I couldn't help myself, good fellows. I was only carrying out orders. I would never come after such brave men. Pity my eighty-year-old mother and let me live! I'm her sole support!”

“Truss him up like a dumpling and put him into the cabin.”

The Ruan brothers threw the bodies in the water, then whistled. From the reeds four or five fishermen in boats emerged and went aboard the vessel. Seventh and Second each took one of the small craft.

Meanwhile, the soldiers on the boat with the deputy were grumbling. “A police officer like Inspector Ho ought to know better than go out and do his own scouting! All this time and he still hasn't returned!”

By then it was the first watch, and stars filled the sky. The men in the boats were enjoying the coolness. Suddenly, a strange wind blew up behind them, so fierce that it snapped the mooring ropes. The soldiers covered their faces and cried out in alarm.

Helpless, they heard a sharp whistle behind them. They stared into the wind to see a fiery glow in the reeds along the opposite shore.

“We're finished!” they exclaimed.

There were over a hundred government vessels, big and small. These were so buffeted by the gale that they collided with each other, out of control. The fiery glow was now almost upon them. A flotilla of small boats, bound together in pairs, and heaped with reeds and brushwood which were crackling brightly with flames, was sweeping quickly downward in the wind. The government craft were all snarled together and the creek was narrow. They couldn't get out of the way.

The first of the fire vessels pushed in among a dozen or so large boats, and they began to burn. Men, swimming under-water, were propelling the fire vessels forward. The soldiers and their officers leaped for the bank, only to discover that they were surrounded by reeds and marsh, without a strip of solid ground. Then the reeds along the shore also burst into flame, cutting them off completely.

The wind was strong, the blaze was fierce. Soldiers and officers hastily immersed themselves in the soft mud. A small swift craft emerged from the fiery glow, one man sculling in the stern, a Taoist priest seated in the bow, holding a gleaming sword.

“Not a single one will escape!” he shouted.

The men in the mud huddled together in panic. At that moment from the reeds along the east bank came two men leading four or five fishermen, all armed with glittering swords and spears. Another two men, also followed by four or five fishermen, advanced from the reeds along the west bank, and these carried shining fish gaffs. The four bold fellows and their cohorts

attacked the hapless foe from both sides. Before long scores of soldiers and officers lay dead in the soggy mire.

Chao Gai and Ruan the Fifth had come from the east bank. Second and Seventh had come from the west. The Taoist priest on the boat who summoned the wind was Gongsun Sheng. These five brave fellows, with the aid of a dozen or so fishermen, slew in the reeds a great host of officers and men. The only one left was Inspector Ho, trussed up like a dumpling in the cabin. Second carried him to the bank and pointed at him angrily.

“You wretched beast! You extort and squeeze the people of Jizhou! Originally I was going to make mincemeat out of you, but now I want you to go back and tell that crooked prefect that the three heroes of Stone Tablet —the Ruan brothers, and the ruler of East Bank—Chao Gai, are not to be trifled with! We don't go to your town asking for grain, don't you come to our village seeking to die! If he's got eyes in his head he'll see that even if Premier Cai—never mind a pipsqueak of a prefect—sent men to take us, even if the Premier came in person, we'd put daylight into him with twenty or thirty stabs! We're letting you go. Don't come back. And tell your prick of a superior to stay away if he wants to live! There are no highways in this place. My brother will set you on the road.”

Seventh took Ho in a small fast craft to where a road began. “Go straight on from here and you'll reach the highway. All of your men have been killed. If we let you off scot-free, your crook of a prefect would bray his donkey laugh at us. I must ask you to leave your ears here as proof against that!”

He whipped out a knife and cut off Ho's ears. Blood flowed copiously. Seventh wiped his knife, untied the sash that bound his prisoner, and flung him on the bank. Ho, glad to be alive, sought a road that would take him back to Jizhou.

Chao Gai, Gongsun Sheng, the three Ruan brothers and the dozen or more fishermen left the Stone Tablet marshes in six or seven boats and went directly to Lijia Entry, where they found the craft of Wu Yong and Liu Tang, and rejoined them. The teacher wanted to know all about how they

repelled the soldiers, and Chao Gai told him in detail. Wu Yong and the others were delighted.

They set their vessels in order and went together to the tavern of Zhu Gui the Dry-Land Crocodile. When all had arrived, they said they wanted to join the mountain stronghold. Zhu Gui hastily welcomed them. Wu Yong told him their story. The tavern keeper was very pleased, and greeted them, one by one. He invited them in, begged them to be seated, and ordered the waiter to bring wine.

Then he took a leather-bound bow, fitted a whistling arrow, and shot it into a cove of reeds, opposite. Soon a small boat came out, rowed by one of the brigands. Zhu Gui quickly wrote a letter of introduction, stating the number of men who wished to join, and their names, and gave it to the bandit, instructing him to deliver it to the stronghold. After this he slaughtered sheep to feast his guests.

The next morning Zhu Gui ordered a large boat, and invited the bold fellows on board. Together with the boats which had brought Chao Gai and the others, it set forth for the mountain fortress. After sailing a long time, they came to an inlet. They could hear drums beating and gongs crashing along the shore. Four sentry craft glided out, manned by seven or eight bandits. These recognized Zhu Gui, greeted him respectfully, and returned to their hiding place.

At the Shore of Golden Sands the party disembarked, leaving their families and fishermen to wait by the boats. Several score bandits came down the mountain and led them to the fortress gate. Wang Lun and the other leaders came out to greet them. Chao Gai and his party bowed politely. The bandit chieftain returned the courtesy.

“I am called Wang Lun. The fame of Chao Gai the Heavenly King has long thundered in my ears. It is a pleasure to welcome you to our humble stronghold.”

“I am a crude, unlettered fellow seeking refuge, hoping only to be a simple foot soldier under your command. Please do not refuse me.”

“You mustn't talk like that. Please come to our small fortress, and we will confer.”

All went up the mountain and entered Righteous Fraternity Hall, where Wang Lun insisted that his guests sit on the raised platform. Chao Gai and his six companions stood in a row on the right, while Wang Lun and the other bandit leaders stood in a row on the left. After an exchange of courtesies, they took their seats as hosts and guests. Wang Lun instructed his junior officers, at the foot of the platform, to hail the visitors. When this was done, musicians in an ante-chamber commenced to play. The chieftain ordered a lieutenant to go down the mountain and look after his guests' retinue. These were quartered in a hostel below the gate.

Within the fortress two oxen were slaughtered, and ten sheep and five pigs, and everyone feasted, to the accompaniment of drums and horns. And as they drank, Chao Gai told the outlaw leaders the entire story.

Wang Lun listened uneasily, deep in thought, and made only brief noncommittal replies. They dined until evening, then the brigand chiefs escorted their visitors to the hostel below the stronghold gate, and left them to be waited on by the vassals who had come with them.

Chao Gai was very pleased. “We've committed such serious capital crimes. Where else could we find refuge?” he said to the other six. “If it weren't for the kindness of Chieftain Wang Lun we'd be in a real dilemma. We should always be grateful.”

Wu Yong laughed coldly.

“Why are you sceptical, Teacher?” asked Chao Gai. “Tell us what you know.”

“You're brave, but too honest, brother. Don't think for a moment Wang Lun will let us stay. You didn't see what was in his heart. You noted only his facial expression and manner.”

“What's wrong with that?”

“When we first began dining, he was quite friendly. But after you told him how we killed all those officers and soldiers and the deputy, and released Ho Tao, and how bold the Ruan brothers were, his expression changed. Although he answered you courteously, his heart wasn't in it. If he actually wanted to keep us, he would have already assigned us proper seats.

“Du Qian and Song Wan are a couple of boors. What do they know about how to treat a guest? Lin Chong, on the other hand, was an arms instructor in the Imperial Guards, a big city man, very polished. But right now he can't help himself. He holds only fourth place here. I noticed that he looked dissatisfied when he saw how Wang Lun was answering you. He never took his eyes off him. There was clearly something on his mind. I think he'd like to help us, but he's in a difficult position. I'm going to throw out a few suggestions, and see whether I can't set them against each other.”

“We rely completely on your shrewdness, Teacher,” said Chao Gai.

The seven men retired for the night.

The next morning it was announced that Arms Instructor Lin was calling.

“He's come to see us,” Wu Yong said to Chao Gai. “Just what we wanted!”

The seven men hurried out to greet their visitor and invited him into the parlor.

“We imposed too much on you generosity last night,” said Wu Yong. “We must apologize.”

“It is I who must apologize. Though I longed to show my respect, I was not in a position to do so. Please forgive me.”

“We have no talent, but we are not blocks of wood. We were most sensible of your kind intentions. We're extremely grateful.”

Chao Gai begged Lin Chong to take the seat of highest rank. Lin Chong wouldn't hear of it. He pushed Chao into the chair and seated himself opposite. Wu Yong and the other five sat in a row on the side.

“We have long known of the Arms Instructor's fame,” said Chao Gai. “We did not think we would have this opportunity to meet.”

“When I was in the Eastern Capital I never failed in courtesy to my friends,” said Lin Chong. “I now have had the honor to make your acquaintance, but have been unable to behave as I wished. I come especially to express my regret.”

“We sincerely thank you,” said Chao Gai.

“Quite some time ago I heard of the Arms Instructor's chivalry in the Eastern Capital,” said Wu Yong. “How did you fall out with Gao Qiu, and why did he ruin you? When the army fodder depot was burned in Cangzhou, that also was his doing, wasn't it? And who introduced you to this mountain stronghold?”

“If I told you of the wickedness of that scoundrel Gao Qiu it would make your hair stand on end. And I cannot get revenge! I found refuge here on the recommendation of Lord Chai.”

“Not Chai Jin, known in the gallant fraternity as the Small Whirlwind?”

“The very one.”

“I have heard much about his righteousness and generosity, how warmly he treats brave men,” said Chao Gai. “It is said that he is a descendant of the royal Zhou family. How wonderful it would be to meet him!”

“Lord Chai is famed throughout the land,” said Wu Yong. “Surely it was because of your extraordinary skill with weapons, Arms Instructor, that he recommended you here. I am not exaggerating in the least when I say that Wang Lun should have relinquished top leadership to you. This is common opinion and in keeping with Lord Chai's letter.”

“Teacher rates me much too highly. I committed a capital crime and found shelter with Lord Chai. He was quite willing to keep me, but I didn't want him to become involved. I came to this mountain of my own volition. Little did I know that it's a dead end! I don't mind having a lower rank, but Wang

Lun is hard to get along with. He's not sure of himself, and is often untruthful.”

“He seems friendly enough,” said Wu Yong. “What makes him so narrow-hearted?”

“Having you gallant heroes join us would be of great mutual benefit, like embroidering flowers on brocade, like rain on dry sprouts. But Wang Lun's very jealous of the talented and able, he's afraid you'll overwhelm him. When you told, last night, how you slaughtered the soldiers and officers, he was upset. He's plainly reluctant to let your stay. That's why he asked you to rest in this outside hostel.”

“Since that's how he feels,” said Wu Yong, “there's no point in waiting for him to say so. We'll go somewhere else.”

“Please don't take it amiss, but I have an idea,” said Lin Chong. “I was afraid you bold fellows might be thinking of leaving, so I came early to confer. Why not wait and see how Wang Lun behaves today. If the lout speaks reasonably, not like yesterday, then everything can be discussed. But if he breathes so much as half an improper sentence, just leave the rest to me!”

“Your kind consideration is more than we deserve,” said Chao Gai.

“Why should you quarrel with your old brothers for the sake of your new?” asked Wu Yong. “If he'll have us, we'll stay. If not, we'll go.”

“No, Teacher!” cried Lin Chong. “As the ancients say: “The astute and the gallant each cherish their own kind.' That filthy churl! What use is he to anybody? Gallant fellows, you can rely on me.” He rose and took his leave. “We shall be meeting soon,” he said.

They saw him to the gate, and Lin Chong went back up the mountain.

Not long after, a bandit arrived from the stronghold and said: “Today, our chieftains are inviting you to dine in the waterside pavilion in the fort on the south side.”

“Tell them we will be there shortly,” said Chao Gai. The bandit departed.

“What shall we do, Teacher?” Chao Gai asked Wu Yong.

The teacher smiled. “Don't worry, brother. The stronghold is going to have a change of masters. Lin Chong seems determined to have it out with Wang Lun. If he shows any signs of hesitation, my tongue is sharp enough to prick him into open strife. You all carry concealed weapons. If I stroke my beard, get in and help him.”

Chao Gai and the others silently and gladly agreed.

By mid-morning messengers had come four more times to repeat the invitation. Finally, neatly dressed, with weapons hidden on their persons, the seven set out for the feast. Song Wan arrived personally, on horseback, to lead the way, and seven sedan-chairs were provided for the guests. All proceeded directly to the waterside pavilion on the mountain's southern slope, and the seven came down from their conveyances. Wang Lun, Du Qian, Lin Chong and Zhu Gui were waiting to meet them and invite them into the pavilion. Hosts and guests took their seats, to the left and right respectively, on a dais.

Lesser brigands kept on refilling their goblets. When several rounds of wine had been drunk and two courses of food served, Chao Gai proposed to Wang Lun that the seven join the fraternity. But the bandit chieftain casually changed the subject. Wu Yong watched Lin Chong. The arms instructor was glaring at Wang Lun.

They drank until after noon. “Bring them in,” Wang Lun said. Three of the bandits went out and soon returned. One of them was carrying five large silver ingots on a platter. Wang Lun rose, goblet in hand, and addressed himself to Chao Gai.

“We are honored that you heroes have assembled with us here. Unfortunately, our stronghold is only a swampy marsh, not fit for gallants of such stature. We offer these few modest gifts and hope you won't laugh at them. When you have settled in some large suitable fortress, I will personally send men to serve under your command.”

“For a long time we have known that this great stronghold welcomed able fighters,” Chao Gai replied, “and so we made a beeline here to join. If you won't have us, we shall leave. As to the silver you so graciously offer, we cannot accept it. Not that we are rich, but we do have a bit of travel money. Please take back your splendid gift. We must be on our way.

“Why refuse it? We would be very glad to have you. It's only that we're short of grain and housing. Staying in a place like this would be holding you heroes back. It's not in keeping with your dignity. That's why we are not asking you to remain.”

Before the words were out of Wang Lun's mouth, Lin Chong, scowling fiercely, shouted: “When I first came here you tried to put me off by saying you were short of grain and housing! Now you tell brother Chao and his gallant company the same story! What's the big idea?”

“Calm yourself, sir leader,” Wu Yong begged. “We shouldn't have come. We've only stirred up bad feeling among you. Chieftain Wang Lun is not driving us away, he's sending us off with travelling expenses. Please don't be angry, any of you. We'll go, and that will be the end of it.”

“Wang Lun has a knife behind his smile!” said Lin Chong. “He's man of pure words but dirty deeds! I'm not going to let him get away with it!”

“Animal!” barked Wang Lun. “You're not drunk. How dare you speak of me like that? Have you no respect for your superiors?”

“You're an impoverished scholar who failed in the government examinations, a man of threadbare learning,” Lin Chong scoffed. “What right have you to be stronghold leader?”

“Our coming here has caused this quarrel,” Wu Yong said to Chao Gai. “We must get some boats and depart today.” The seven men rose as if to leave the pavilion.

“Stay at least till the end of the banquet,” Wang Lun proposed.

With a kick Lin Chong sent the table crashing to one side. He jumped to his feet and pulled a glittering knife from beneath his robe. Wu Yong stroked his beard. Chao Gai and Liu Tang hurried over as if to restrain Wang Lun.

“You mustn't quarrel,” they exclaimed.

Wu Yong pretended to be soothing Lin Chong. “Please don't be rash,” he urged.

Gongsun Sheng cried to both sides: “Don't destroy your harmony on our account!”

Ruan the Second wrapped his arms around Du Qian, while Fifth enveloped Song Wan, and Seventh did the same to Zhu Qui.

The assembled lesser bandits watched in frightened stupefaction. Lin Chong cursed Wang Lin.

“You're a poor village scholar! If it weren't for Du Qian, you wouldn't even be here! Lord Chai supported you, gave you travelling expenses, befriended you, but when he sent me with a letter of introduction, you did everything to put me off! Now these bold heroes come, and you want to send them down the mountain! Does Mount Liangshan belong to you? You're a thief, jealous of men of talent! What good is there in keeping you alive? You haven't any particular ability. Who are you to lead this stronghold?”

Du Qian, Song Wan and Zhu Gui tried to press forward to help Wang Lun, but they were held so tightly by the Ruan brothers that they couldn't move. The bandit chieftain turned to go. Chao Gai and Liu Tang blocked his path. Wang Lun realized his danger.

“Where are my boon companions?” he cried.

Several bandits who had always been very close to him wanted to come to his rescue, but they were cowed by Lin Chong's fierce manner.

Again Lin cursed the bandit chief, then stabbed him through the heart. Wang Lun collapsed in a heap. Chao Gai and the others each produced a

knife. Lin Chong cut off Wang Lun's head and raised it aloft. Terrified, Du Qian, Song Wan and Zhu Gui fell to their knees.

“Let us serve as grooms who hold your whip and stirrup,” they begged.

Chao Gai, with polite haste, helped them to their feet. Wu Yong pulled the chair of the highest chieftain from the pool of blood and pushed Lin Chong down into it.

“If anyone disagrees, he will go the way of Wang Lun,” he shouted. “From now on Arms Instructor Lin is the leader of Mount Liangshan.”

“No, Teacher,” exclaimed Lin Chong. “I killed the scoundrel out of loyalty to you gallant heroes! I seek no position for myself. I will be the laughing stock of the whole chivalrous fraternity if I take this seat today. I'd rather die, first! But I have another suggestion. I wonder whether you'll listen to me?”

“Speak,” said the others. “Who would dare disagree? Let's hear it.”

Lin Chong's words were brief. But as a result, in Unity Pavilion many men with but one heart gathered, before Righteous Fraternity Hall scores of righteous fighters assembled. The man who executed Heaven's will—that loyal, generous gallant, would soon arrive.

What then did Lin Chong say to Wu Yong? Read our next chapter if

you would know.

Chapter 20
The Men of Liangshan Marsh Make Chao Gai Their Chief
Liu Tang Leaves Yuncheng Town on a Moonlit Night

Still clutching the dagger with which he killed Wang Lun, Lin Chong pointed at all assembled and said: “Although I'm an exile from the Imperial Guards I am able to be with these heroes here today. I turned against Wang Lun because his heart was narrow, because he was jealous of their talents

and refused to accept them, not because I wanted his position. I could never have brains and courage enough to destroy the evil ministers surrounding the emperor and repulse their armies. Brother Chao is a gallant, charitable man. He is intelligent and brave. He's famed and admired everywhere. In the spirit of chivalry I propose that he become the leader of this stronghold. What do you say?”

“Very suitable,” cried the men.

“No,” said Chao Gai. “Since ancient times 'the strong guest must not exceed his host.' Strong I may be, but I've only recently arrived from distant parts. I cannot assume high command.”

Lin Cong pushed him into the leader's chair. “This is the time. Don't refuse.” To the other brigands he shouted: “If anyone disagrees, let him remember what happened to Wang Lun!”

Courteously he insisted that Chao Gai retain his seat. He called to the bandits to come to the pavilion and pay homage. He ordered that Wang Lun's body be removed, and that a feast be prepared inside the fortress. He instructed that all the junior officers stationed on the front and rear of the mountain be summoned to the stronghold for a meeting.

Lin Chong and the others helped Chao Gai into a sedan-chair, then all got on their horses and proceeded to Righteous Fraternity Hall, where they dismounted and entered. Chao Gai was seated on the chair of first rank, in the middle. An incense burner was lit in the center of the hall. Lin Chong came forward.

“I'm only a crude fellow who knows a bit about arms. I have no learning or talent, no wisdom or technique. Today we are fortunate enough to be here with you gallant men and our just principles are clear. We cannot be casual about authority, as we were before. Teacher Wu Yong shall be our military adviser, in charge of our fighting forces. He must take the second seat.”

Wu Young replied: “I'm a simple village school teacher, with neither the leaning nor the ability to manage affairs. Though I've read something of the

military classics by Sun and Wu, I haven't shown even half a grain of talent. How can I accept?”

“The time is at hand,” Lin Chong said. “No need for modesty.” Wu Yong took the second chair and Lin Chong said: “Master Gongsun, please take the third seat.”

“That cannot be,” Chao Gai protested. “If you keep giving way like this, I'll withdraw completely.”

“You mustn't say that, brother. Master Gongsun is known throughout the gallant fraternity. He's an excellent commander, and even the spirits cannot fathom his tactics. He can summon the wind and the rain. There's no one like him!”

“Though I know a bit of magic,” said the Taoist priest, “I haven't any real learning to benefit the world. How dare I become a leader? That place belongs to you.”

“We all saw your cleverness today in defeating the enemy,” said Lin Chong. “A tripod vessel must have three legs. With only two it cannot stand. No need to be polite.”

Gongsun took the third seat. Lin Chong wanted to yield further, but Chao Gai, Wu Yong and Gongsun wouldn't hear of it. “Because you talked of a tripod needing three legs, we had no choice but to accept the three top positions,” they explained. “But we'll all withdraw if you relinquish any further.” They firmly seated him in the fourth chair.

“Song and Du should now be seated,” said Chao Gai. But Du Qian and Song Wan absolutely refused. They begged Liu Tang, Ruan the Second, Ruan the Fifth and Ruan the Seventh to take the fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth places respectively. Du Qian then accepted the ninth chair, Song Wan the tenth and Zhu Gui the eleventh.

From then on, the positions of the eleven heroes were fixed in Liangshan Marsh. The nearly eight hundred men guarding the mountain front and rear

all came and paid their respects, then stood on either side. Chao Gai addressed them.

“Today, Arms Instructor Lin has made me leader of this stronghold and Teacher Wu the military advisor. Master Gongsun also controls military authority. Arms Instructor Lin and the others have over-all charge of the fortress. You lieutenants retain your original commands. Observe your daily duties and guard the palisades and the beaches. Let no mishaps occur. We must all be united in mind and virtue.”

He directed that the houses on both sides of the hall be put in order for the two families which had come with them, and ordered that the purloined birthday gifts—the gold and silver and jewels—as well as the valuables he had taken with him from the manor, be brought forth. From these he distributed largesse to the lieutenants and the rank and file brigands.

Oxen and horses were slaughtered as a sacrifice to the gods of Heaven and Earth, and in celebration of the reorganization. The leaders ate and drank far into the night. They feasted in this manner for several days. Then Chao Gai, Wu Yong and the other chieftains checked the granaries, had the fortifications repaired and more weapons made— lances, halberds, bows, arrows, armor and helmets—readied boats large and small, trained their soldiers and boatmen to board vessels and fight, and prepared in general to meet any enemy attack. Of this we'll say no more. One day, seeing how generously Chao Gai provided for the families of the men living in the stronghold, Lin Chong thought of his wife in the Eastern Capital. Was she still alive? He confided his concern to Chao Gai.

“I've been meaning to send for her ever since I came here. But Wang Lun was shifty and hard to get along with, so I kept putting it off. I wish I knew what's become of her.”

“Send someone to fetch her, brother. Write a letter, We'll have a man deliver it and bring her here as soon as possible. Then you won't have to worry.”

Lin Chong wrote a letter and gave it to a pair of trusted brigands. Less than two months later, they returned to the fortress.

“We went straight to the neighborhood of Marshal Gao's residence in the Eastern Capital,” they declared, “and found your father-in-law's home. We were told that Marshal Gao had been pressing your wife to marry his son. Rather than do that, she hung herself. She's been dead for half a year. Broken with grief, your father-in-law half a month ago fell ill and died. Only Jin Er, the maidservant, is left. She has married and her husband has moved in with her. We checked with your neighbors, and they told us the same story. As soon as we got the facts, we came back to report.”

Lin Chong wept. From then on, he cast out all thoughts of home and loved ones. Chao Gai, observing this, sighed. The stronghold settled down to a daily routine of training the men and preparing to repulse attacks by government troops.

During a conference of leaders one day in Righteous Fraternity Hall a bandit hurried up the mountain and announced: “Troops from Jizhou Prefecture, about two thousand of them, sailing this way in four or five hundred boats, large and small! They've stopped temporarily in the lake at Stone Tablet.”

“They'll soon be here,” Chao Gai said to Wu Yong in alarm. “How shall we deal with them?”

The teacher laughed. “There's nothing to worry about. I have a plan. 'Earth can stop the flow of water, generals can cope with enemy troops,' as the old saying goes.” Quietly, he told the three Ruan brothers what to do, then gave instructions to Lin Chong and Liu Tang, and to Du Qian and Song Wan.

Well over a thousand soldiers were assembled in locally commandeered boats on the lake at Stone Tablet, dispatched there by the prefect of Jizhou. They were headed by District Garrison Commander Huang An and a high police officer. Dividing into two squadrons, they proceeded separately across the lake.

Huang An's flotilla, with flags waving and soldiers yelling, advanced swiftly towards the Shore of Golden Sands. As they drew near, mournful

notes floated across the water.

“Isn't that a horn?” asked Huang An.

He signalled his boats to halt, and peered into the distance. Three craft came towards them, each rowed by four men, all dressed alike. One man was standing on the prow, a red bandanna on his head and wearing a red silk tunic, a barbed spear in his hand.

One of the soldiers recognized them. “Those are the Ruan brothers,” he said to Huang An. “Second, Fifth and Seventh.”

“After them,” cried Huang An. “We'll take all three!”

From two sides, between forty and fifty craft gave chase, the soldiers shouting fiercely. Shrill whistles came from the three boats, which turned and fled. Huang An shook his spear.

“Kill those robbers,” he exclaimed. “I'll reward you handsomely!”

The soldiers sent a shower of arrows after the racing craft. The three Ruan brothers whipped fox pelts out of the cabins and warded the arrows off. The government vessels followed in hot pursuit. They had gone only two or three *li* into an inlet when a small boat sped up from the rear.

“Stop chasing them,” a man on the little craft cried. “The bandits have killed all our troops in the other squadron and thrown them into the water, and they've captured our boats!”

“How did you fall into their hands?” Huang An demanded.

“As we were sailing, we saw two boats, far off. There were five men on each. We chased after them. When we had gone about four *li,* seven or eight small vessels suddenly came at us from the surrounding creeks. Their arrows descended on us like a swarm of locusts. We, turned around quickly. But when we reached an outlet, we found that twenty or thirty men on both banks had stretched a rope across the water. As we drifted towards it, they showered us with stones and blinding lime. We jumped into the water and

fled for our lives. A few of us got away. When we reached the place where our horses had been, they were gone, taken by the brigands. The guards were lying dead in the water. Luckily, we found this boat in the reeds, and rushed after you to report."

Huang An groaned. He waved a white flag, signalling his other craft to abandon the chase and return. Just as they swung about, three vessels, followed by another dozen, were seen coming in their direction from behind, each with four or five men on board. These waved red flags and whistled sharply, sailing swiftly towards the government craft. Before Huang An could spread his flotilla out in battle formation, cannon thundered from the reeds, which suddenly were alive with red flags. Huang An's confusion bordered on panic.

A voice sang out from the rapidly approaching boats: "Huang An can go — if he leaves his head behind!"

Huang ordered his men to row with all their might and get beyond the reeds. From inlets on both sides of the lake forty or fifty small vessels shot out and deluged the government soldiers with arrows. Huang An tried desperately to get through this forest of feathered shafts. He had only three or four small boats left.

He leaped over into a fast little skiff. He could see his men all jumping into the water. Some were being hauled away on their boats. The vast majority had been slaughtered. Just as Huang An was setting the skiff in motion, Liu Tang, on the prow of a craft near the reeds, reached out and caught it with a grappling hook. He bounded on board and grasped Huang An around the middle.

"Struggle is useless," shouted Liu Tang.

The soldiers who tried to swim were killed with arrows. Those who were afraid to take the plunge were captured on their boats.

Liu Tang dragged Huang An to the bank. From the mountain in the distance Chao Gai and Gongsun Sheng approached on horseback, carrying swords and leading a reinforcement of fifty or sixty men, about half of them

mounted. Altogether, nearly two hundred of the enemy were taken prisoner. The numerous captured boats were removed to the waterside fortifications at the southern foot of the mountain.

The brigand leaders and their lieutenants proceeded to the stronghold. Chao Gai got off his horse, went into Righteous Fraternity Hall and took his seat. The others removed their armor and weapons and sat down around him. Huang An was tied to a pillar. Gold and silver and silks were distributed among the rank and file as rewards. A count was made of the battle trophies. More than six hundred horses had been seized. That was Lin Chong's work. Du Qian and Song Wan had won the victory on the eastern lake, the three Ruan brothers on the western. Liu Tang had captured the enemy commander Huang An.

The chieftains were very pleased. Oxen and horses were slaughtered and a feast was laid. Home-made fine wine was served, and fresh lotus root and fish from the lake, to say nothing of peaches, apricots, plums, loquats, dates, persimmons and chestnuts from the mountain orchards, as well as chicken, pork, goose and duck, raised domestically in the stronghold.

Congratulations were exchanged all around. For men newly arrived at the fortress to have achieved so complete a victory was no small accomplishment!

As they were drinking, a bandit entered and said: “A messenger from chief Zhu Gui, below the mountain.”

Chao Gai had him brought in, and asked what was up.

“Zhu Gui has heard that a party of several score merchants will be passing this way by land, tonight,” said the messenger.

“Just when we were running short of gold and silks,” said Chao Gai. “Who will lead this raid?”

“How about us?” said the three Ruans.

“Right, good brothers. Be cautious, go quickly and return soon.”

The Ruan brothers left the hall. They changed their clothes, tied on their swords, took their halberds, pitchforks and barbed spears, and selected a hundred men. They bade farewell to the leaders in the meeting hall, and went down the mountain. At the Shore of Golden Sands they boarded boats and went across to Zhu Gui's tavern.

Chao Gai was afraid the Ruan brothers couldn't handle it alone. He sent Liu Tang with an additional hundred men to join them.

“Take only the merchants' money and valuables,” he admonished Liu Tang as he was leaving. “Their lives must be spared.”

Liu Tang departed. When, by the third watch, the raiders hadn't returned, Chao Gai dispatched Du Qian and Song Wan with still another fifty men.

Chao Gai, Wu Yong, Gongsun Sheng and Lin Chong drank till dawn. A messenger entered and said: “Thanks to Zhu Gui we've captured twenty carts of money and valuables and nearly fifty mules, donkeys and horses!”

“Was anyone killed?” asked Chao Gai.

“When the merchants saw us coming at them so strongly, they abandoned their carts, animal and baggage and fled. Not one of them was harmed.”

Chao Gai was delighted. “We've just come to the stronghold. We mustn't hurt people.” He gave the messenger a silver ingot and went down the mountain to the Shore of Golden Sands in a party with wine and fruit. The leaders of the raid were unloading carts and sending the boats back for the captured horses, donkeys and mules.

It was a joyful reunion. After ceremonial cups were drunk, Zhu Gui was summoned to a banquet in the stronghold. Chao Gai and the others returned to Righteous Fraternity Hall and sat around in a circle. Brigands opened bale after bale of captured booty, putting all the silken clothing in a pile on one side, the ordinary merchandise in a pile on the other, and gold and silver and other valuables in the center.

The chieftains were very pleased at the large haul. They directed the junior officer in charge of the warehouses to store away half of each pile off for future use. The remainder was divided into two parts. One part was split among the eleven chieftains. The rank and file shared equally in the second part.

A distinguishing mark was tattooed on the face of each captured soldier. The stronger prisoners were made grooms and gatherers of fuel, the weaker were put to looking after the carts and cutting fodder. Huang An was locked up in a building in the rear of the fortress.

“When we first came here seeking refuge,” said Chao Gai, “we hoped only to become junior officers under Wang Lun. Then Arms Instructor Lin Chong graciously relinquished the leadership to me. Now we have had two unexpected happy events in a row: First, we defeated the government soldiers, captured many men, horses and boats, and took Huang An. Second, we have seized a great deal of gold, silver and other valuables. We owe all this to your talents, brothers.”

“Without the auspiciousness of elder brother we would have obtained nothing,” the other leaders protested courteously.

“We seven newcomers must thank Clerk Song Jiang and Constable Zhu Tong for being alive today,” Chao Gai reminded Wu Yong. '“The man who does not repay kindness is not human,' as the ancients said. To whom do we owe our present happiness and prosperity? We must send some of our gold and silver to Yuncheng Town. That is a matter of first importance. And Bai Sheng is still in the prison in Jizhou. We've got to save him.”

“Don't worry,” said Wu Yong. “I have a plan. Although Clerk Song is a noble person and doesn't seek our thanks, we must do our part. As soon as things are a bit more settled here, we'll certainly have one of our brothers go to him. As to Bai Sheng, we'll send someone not known in Jizhou and have him spend a bit of money among the jailers, high and low, to induce them to relax their strictures. That will make it easier for us to get Bai Sheng out. What we should do now is discuss storing grain, building boats, manufacturing tools of war, strengthening our fortifications, building more living quarters, putting our clothing and armor in order, making spears and

swords and bows and arrows, and preparing to meet any government attack."

"That's so," said Chao Gai. "We'll follow your advice." Wu Yong provided a division of duties among the leaders. Of that we'll say no more.

Nor need we dwell on how Liangshan Marsh prospered from the time Chao Gai came to the fortress. We'll talk rather of the soldiers who escaped and returned to Jizhou. They told the prefect that the brigands had captured Huang An and wiped out his troops, that the men of the stronghold were very brave, that no one could get near enough to arrest them. The area was a maze of waterways and paths, they reported. Winning a battle there was impossible.

The prefect could only lament to the Premier's special emissary: "Ho Tao went in there first with a large force and was the only one to come back alive—without his ears! He's been resting at home ever since, and still hasn't recovered. All his five hundred men are gone. Then I sent District Garrison Commander Huang An and a senior prefectural police officer with many troops to arrest the bandits, and they too have vanished. Huang An is a prisoner in the fortress, and I don't know how many officers and men have been slaughtered. We can't beat those brigands! What am I going to do?" His insides were being torn by conflicting thoughts, but he had no solution.

Just then a lieutenant entered and announced: "A new prefect is approaching the East Gate reception pavilion. I have rushed here to report."

The prefect got on his horse and hurried to the reception pavilion outside the East Gate. From the cloud of dust still hanging there, it was apparent the new official had already arrived and dismounted. The prefect went into the pavilion and met his successor. The latter handed him documents under the imprint of the Council of Administration ordering his replacement by the new prefect. After reading them, the prefect and his successor went to the prefecture where the prefect turned over the seals of office and all monies and grain formerly in his charge. He then laid a welcoming feast for the

new official, and told him about his troubles with the bandits in Liangshan Marsh, and how they had just destroyed a large government expedition.

The face of the new prefect turned the color of clay. “So it was for this Premier Cai raised me in rank,” he said to himself. “What a place he's given me, and what an office! No strong soldiers, no able commanders. How am I supposed to apprehend those bandits? Suppose the rowdies come here demanding grain? What am I going to do?”

The next day, the former prefect packed his belongings and departed for the Eastern Capital, to await his punishment. Of him we'll say no more.

After taking office, the new prefect sent for the new garrison commander and they discussed a campaign against the mountain stronghold. They would replenish their troops, buy more horses, store fodder and grain, recruit men who were clever and bold. The prefect wrote to the Council of Administration, requesting that neighboring prefectures be directed to give all possible aid. At the same time he issued an order to the counties under him to join in the hunt and keep a close watch on their borders. No more of that need be said.

When the prefectural order was received in Yuncheng, the magistrate directed his clerk Song Jiang to relay the instructions to the county's subordinate townships. Song read the document and was shocked.

“I never dreamed Chao Gai and the others would go so far,” he said to himself. “They've robbed the birthday gifts, killed policemen, injured Inspector Ho Tao, annihilated many soldiers and horses, and are holding Huang An in their fortress! For such crimes whole families and relatives to the ninth degree of consanguinity can be executed. They may have been forced into it, but the facts stand. Legally, they have no excuse. If anything should go wrong, they'll be in a terrible fix.”

He brooded for a time, then told his assistant Zhang Wenyuan to draw up instructions and make the prefectural order known to the various townships and villages.

Song Jiang left the office. Before he had gone thirty paces, a voice hailed him from behind: “Clerk Song!”

He turned around. There was Mistress Wang, the matchmaker, with another woman. “You're in luck,” she said to her companion. “This is our charitable clerk.”

“What did you want to see me about?” asked Song.

Mistress Wang blocked his way. She pointed at the other woman. “Her family is from the Eastern Capital, they're not local people. Just three of them—her husband Old Yan, her daughter Poxi, and herself. Old Yan used to be a singer, and he taught Poxi many ballads. She's only eighteen, quite pretty, too. They came here to Shandong to join the household of an official they knew, but they couldn't find him. They drifted around and ended up in Yuncheng. But people here don't care much for music and entertainment, and they haven't been able to make a living. They have a flat in a quiet lane behind the magistracy. Yesterday, Old Yan fell ill of the epidemic and died, but his wife has no money to bury him. She doesn't know what to do, and she's asked me to find a man to keep Poxi. 'Where can I find anybody who would be so good at a time like this?' I said. I didn't know where to borrow money for her, either. It looked hopeless. Then I saw you, and I hurried after you with Mistress Yan. Have pity on her. Help her buy a coffin.”

“So that's it,” said Song Jiang. “You two come with me. I'll borrow a pen and ink at that tavern at the end of the lane and write a note to the coffin shop in the east part of town.” And he asked: “Have you living expenses?”

“We can't even afford a coffin,” said Mistress Yan. “Where would we find living expenses?”

“Then I'll give you ten ounces of silver.”

“You are my parents reborn! I'd gladly serve as a donkey or a horse to repay you!”

“No need to talk like that.” Song Jiang gave the widow a silver ingot and departed.

She took the note to the coffin shop, selected a casket, returned home and arranged for the funeral. When it was over, she still had five or six ounces of silver left, which she and her daughter kept for their living expenses. Of that we'll say no more.

One day, Mistress Yan came to thank Song Jiang, and she observed that he had no woman in the house. Later, she asked her neighbor, Mistress Wang, about it.

“Doesn't he have a wife?”

“I know his home is in Song Family Village, but I've never heard any mention of a wife. He works here as county clerk and has only temporary quarters. He's always handing out money for coffins and medicines, and helping people in distress. I doubt if he's married.”

“My daughter is a good-looking girl. She can sing and knows all sorts of amusing games. When she was little and we lived in the Eastern Capital she used to wander around the brothels. All the managers thought she was adorable. One or two famous courtesans several times offered to buy her. But I wouldn't agree, because there was only my husband and myself at home and no son to support us in our old age. I never thought Poxi would suffer as a result. When I went to thank Clerk Song the other day I noticed he had no wife around. I wish you'd tell him for me-if he wants a woman. I'll be glad to give him Poxi. He was very charitable to me, with your help. I have no other way to thank him, but this much I can do.”

The next day, Mistress Wang went to Song Jiang and broached the subject. At first he refused. But he was no match for the marriage broker's eloquence, and finally he consented. He took a house in the western part of town, bought some furnishings, and installed Poxi and her mother. In less than half a month, Poxi was draped in silks and her hair was studded with precious ornaments. Not long after, even Mistress Yan had a certain amount of finery. Poxi was living in luxury.

In the beginning, Song Jiang slept with her every night. But gradually, he came to the house less frequently. Why? Well, Song Jiang was a chivalrous man whose main interest was skill with weapons. Sex had only a moderate

appeal. Poxi was a frivolous girl of eighteen or so, in the bloom of youth. She was quite dissatisfied with Song Jiang.

One day he brought his assistant Zhang Wenyuan over to have some wine. Zhang was a handsome young fellow, with dark brows, fine eyes, white teeth and ruby lips. Fond of the houses of pleasures, he was something of gadabout, and had learned all the romantic mannerisms. Besides which he was an accomplished musician and could play all the stringed instruments and woodwinds.

Poxi, an entertainer who loved to drink and frolic, was attracted to Zhang the moment she laid eyes on him. She kept giving him emotion-laden glances. Zhang, an enthusiastic drinker and ladies' man, of course understood the girl's suggestive signals. Afterwards, he called when Song Jiang was not at home, pretending to be looking for him. Poxi asked him to stay to tea. They talked of this and that, and suddenly they were lovers.

Who could have expected that from then on the two would burn so hotly that Poxi was left without a particle of affection for Song. She spoke harshly to him whenever he called and never sought to dally with him. Song was a soldierly man who cared little for women. So his visits dwindled to once every ten days or half month.

The lovers stuck together like glue. Zhang came every night and left with the dawn. All the neighbors knew about it, and word finally reached Song's ears. He only half believed the report.

“Anyhow,” he thought, “she's not a real wife formally chosen by my father and mother. If she's lost interest in me, what do I care? I'll just stop going.” More than a month went by and he did not call. Mistress Yan sent an invitation, but he wouldn't go. He claimed he was too busy.

To speak of another matter, on leaving the magistracy one day towards evening, Song Jiang went into the shop across the street and sat down to have some tea. A big fellow, dripping sweat and breathing hard as he walked, was gazing at the magistrate's office. He was wearing a broad-brimmed white felt hat and a silken gown of dark green, with leggings and

knee-guards and sandals of hemp, a sword at his waist and a large pack on his back.

The man was clearly hesitant about something. Song Jiang got up and followed. The man had gone about thirty paces when he turned around and stared at Song Jiang. He showed no signs of recognition, but to Song he looked familiar.

“Now where have I seen that fellow before?” he mused. For the moment he couldn't recall.

A gleam of recognition came into the man's eye. He stopped and looked at the clerk, but didn't have the courage to speak.

“What's the matter with the fellow? Why is he staring at me like that?” thought Song Jiang. He too couldn't bring himself to ask.

The man went into a barber shop. “Can you tell me the name of that official outside, brother?” he queried.

“That's Clerk Song Jiang,” the barber replied.

Halberd formally in hand, the man approached Song Jiang and hailed him respectfully. “Don't you remember me, sir Clerk?”

“You look very familiar.”

“Let's walk a bit, and talk.”

Song Jiang led him into a quiet lane.

“That tavern might be better,” the man suggested.

The two entered the tavern and went upstairs and sat down in a secluded room. The man rested his halberd, removed his pack and placed it under the table. Then he dropped to his knees and kowtowed.

Song Jiang hastily returned the courtesy. “May I ask your name, sir?” he said.

“Benefactor,” the man replied, “how could you have forgotten your younger brother?”

“Who are you? You really do look familiar, but I don't remember.”

“I'm Liu Tang, known as the Red-Haired Demon. I had the honor of meeting you in Ward Chief Chao's manor. You saved our lives.”

Song Jiang was startled. “Brother,” he cried, “you're very rash. It's lucky no policeman has seen you, or you might be in serious danger!”

“Even if it meant my life, I had to thank you!”

“How are Ward Chief Chao and the others? Who sent you here?”

“Brother Chao is very grateful to you for saving his life. He feels he must express his thanks. He's now the highest leader of our stronghold on Mount Liangshan. Wu Yong is military adviser of our army. Gongsun Sheng also controls military affairs. Lin Chong gave us full support, and destroyed Wang Lun. He, and the three who were originally there—Du Qian, Song Wan and Zhu Gui—plus us seven make a total of eleven leaders. We have a force of nearly eight hundred men, and grain without measure. There is no way we Can repay you for your great benevolence, but I have been sent with a letter and a hundred ounces of gold as a token of our thanks to you and Constable Zhu Tong.”

Liu Tang opened his pack, produced a letter and gave it to Song Jiang. The clerk read it, then drew a pouch from inside his gown. Liu Tang also took a bundle of gold from the pack and placed it on the table. Song chose only a single gold bar, wrapped it in the letter and put both in the pouch, which he again concealed beneath his gown.

“Cover the gold up, brother,” he said. He called a waiter to bring wine, a platter of beef, some vegetable dishes and fruit, and to pour the wine for his guest.

Day was drawing to a close when Liu Tang finished drinking. The waiter went out. Liu Tang again opened the bundle of gold on the table. Song Jiang

stopped him.

“Listen to me, brother. You seven have just gone to the mountain stronghold. It's time when you can use money. I have a family income I get along on. Keep the rest of this gold for me in the fortress. I'll come for it when I need it. You see I'm not refusing—I've taken one bar. Zhu Tong also has family property. You don't have to give him anything. I'll tell him of your good intentions and that will be enough. I won't ask you to stay the night, brother. If you were recognized it would be no joke. Tonight there will be a bright moon and you'll be able to get back to the stronghold. Don't hang around here. Give my best regards to the leaders and say I hope they'll forgive me for not coming to congratulate them in person.”

“We shall never be able to repay you, brother, for your enormous kindness, but I have been sent specially with this small token of our appreciation. Ward Chief Chao is our chieftain and Wu Yong is our military adviser. They have ordered me to deliver the gold. How can I take it back? I'll definitely be reprimanded.”

“Since your discipline is so strict, I'll write a letter, explaining, which you can give them.”

No matter how Liu Tang pleaded, Song Jiang remained unyielding. He had the waiter bring pen and paper, wrote a detailed letter and made Liu Tang place it in his pack. Liu Tang was a straightforward fellow. When he saw that Song Jiang was determined not to accept the gold, he wrapped it up and put it away.

It was getting late. “Since you have a reply, brother,” said Liu Tang, “I'll deliver it tonight.”

“If I don't keep you, you understand why.”

Liu Tang bowed four times. Song Jiang summoned the waiter.

“This gentleman is leaving an ounce of silver. I'll drop in tomorrow to settle accounts.”

Liu Tang shouldered his pack, picked up his halberd and followed Song Jiang down the stairs. They walked together from the tavern to the end of the lane. Dusk had fallen and a full moon rode in the sky. Song grasped Liu Tang's hand.

“Be careful, brother. Don't come here again. There are too many police. It's dangerous. I won't see you off any further. We'll say goodbye here.”

Liu Tang strode away in the moonlight, heading west. That same night he returned to Liangshan Marsh.

As Song Jiang walked slowly back to his quarters, he thought: “How fortunate that none of the police spotted him! That really would have put the fat in the fire!” Then he mused: “So Chao Gai has turned brigand. And he's doing things in a big way!”

He had made only a couple of turns through the streets when a voice hailed him from behind.

“Where've you been, sir Clerk? I've been looking all over for you.”

He looked around, and started in surprise.

And as a result, the clerk's timidity turned to courage, and his kindly nature became fierce.

Who was the person who called Song Jiang? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 21
Drunk, the Old Bawd Beats Tang the Ox
Song Jiang Slays Poxi in a Fit of Anger

As Song Jiang ambled back to his quarters along the moonlit street after seeing Liu Tang off, it was Mistress Yan who hailed him from behind.

She hurried to catch up. “I sent someone with an invitation a long time age, but you're so important it's hard to get hold of you,” she said. “If my baggage of a daughter has said anything to offend you, forgive her for my sake. I've reprimanded the girl, and told her she must apologize. I'm in luck tonight, running into you. We can go back together.”

“I'm busy at the magistrate's office. I can't get away. I'll come another time.”

“Nothing doing. The girl is at home longing for you. Comfort her a bit. Why must you be this way?”

“I'm really busy. I'll come tomorrow, for sure.”

“No, tonight.” She pulled him by the sleeve. “Who's provoking you against her? We're dependent on you for the rest of our lives. Whoever is telling you stories, don't believe him. Make up your own mind. If my daughter has done anything wrong, I'm the one to blame. Please come with me.”

“Stop insisting. I'm busy and can't get away.”

“The magistrate won't punish you if you put your work off a little while. I'm not likely to run into you again. You must come. I've things to tell you when we get home.”

Song Jiang was an impetuous fellow, and the old woman clung to him tenaciously. “Let go of my arm,” he said. “I'll go.”

“Don't rum away. An old woman like me could never keep up with you.”

“What would I do that for!”

They continued on, side by side. At the door, Song Jiang halted. Mistress Yan pulled him by the hand.

“You've come this far. Why not go in?”

Song Jiang entered and sat down on a bench. The sly old woman, afraid that he would try to escape, sat down beside him.

“Daughter,” she called, “your beloved is here.”

Poxi was lying on her bed, staring at the lamp and thinking of nothing in particular. She was hoping that Zhang would come. When she heard her mother say: “Your beloved is here,” she thought it was the young rake. She got up quickly and fixed her hair.

“That rogue,” she muttered. “He made me wait long enough. I'll box his ears!”

She flew down the stairs and peeked through the lattice wall. The glass lamp in the parlor brightly illuminated the figure of Song Jiang. Poxi promptly turned, went back up the stairs and threw herself down on her bed.

Mistress Yan heard her daughter's footsteps come down and then go up again. “Your lover is here, daughter,” she shouted. “Why have you gone away?”

From her bed, Poxi replied: “This room isn't so far that he can't reach it! He's not blind! Why doesn't he come up here instead of waiting for me to come down and greet him? Don't gabble so!”

“She's bitter that you stayed away so long,” Mistress Yan explained to Song Jiang. “That's why she talks like that.” The old woman laughed. “I'll go with you.”

Song Jiang felt uncomfortable and awkward. But Mistress Yan was insistent, and he went with her up the stairs.

The girl's room was fairly large. In the outer half was a dressing-table and bench. The inner half contained on one side a carved bed with railings at head and foot and hung with a red silk canopy. There was a clothing rack and a towel at one end of the bed. At the other was a washbasin. A pewter lampstand rested on gold lacquered table, which was flanked by two matching stools. In the center of the middle wall was a painting of beautiful girl. Four wooden armchairs stood in a row along the wall opposite the bed.

Mistress Yan pulled Song Jiang into the room, and he sat down on one of the stools near the bed. The old woman went over and pulled her daughter up.

“Sir Clerk is here. He's been staying away because you've offended him. You have a rotten temper, but you think of him often. It hasn't been easy for me to get him to come. Yet instead of getting up and apologizing, you sulk!”

Poxi pushed her hands away. “What are you making such a fuss about? I haven't done anything wrong. If he never comes how can I apologize?”

Song Jiang listened but did not speak. The old woman pulled a chair over beside him and pushed the girl down on it.

“You sit here with him. If you won't apologize, at least behave yourself.”

But Poxi refused to sit by Song Jiang. She took a chair opposite. The clerk kept his gaze lowered and remained silent. Poxi averted her face.

“'Without wine and soy sauce how can you lay a feast?'“ quipped Mistress Yan. “I've got some good wine. Now all we need is some food and we'll be able to express our apologies. Daughter, keep sir Clerk company. Don't be embarrassed. I'll be right back.”

“That old woman has me nailed down tight,” thought Song Jiang. “When she goes downstairs, I'll leave!”

But Mistress Yan guessed what he was planning, and bolted the bedroom door from the outside after her.

“The old bawd's out-foxed me,” Song Jiang said to himself.

Mistress Yan went downstairs, lit the lamp by the stove, saw that the water was hot, and added a few sticks of wood. She took some change and, at the end of the lane, bought fruit, fresh fish, a tender chicken, and pickled fish. These she brought home, and put them on plates. After pouring the wine into a jug, she ladled some into a kettle and heated it on the stove. She

poured the warm spirits into a wine pot. Then she cooked a few dishes and carried these, along with three cups and three sets of chopsticks, on a tray upstairs.

She set the tray on the dressing table, opened the bedroom door, entered, and placed the food and drink on the table of gold lacquer.

Song Jiang still sat with his head down, Poxi with her face turned.

“Daughter, pour the wine.”

“You two drink. I don't feel like it.”

“Your father and I spoiled you since childhood. But you shouldn't act like this in front of others.”

“What if I don't pour the wine? Will his sword come flying and cut off my head?”

The old woman laughed. “It's all my fault. Sir Clerk is a gentleman. He won't take umbrage at the likes of you. If you won't pour the wine at least turn around and drink with us.”

But the girl wouldn't look at Song Jiang, and Mistress Yan had to toast him herself. He reluctantly drank a cup.

“Don't blame her,” the old woman urged with a smile. “I know there are a lot of rumors. I'll explain everything tomorrow. Some people are envious of you. It burns them up to see you here. They'll say anything that comes into their heads. Just empty farts! Don't listen to them. Now, let's drink.”

She filled the three cups and said to her daughter: “Quit acting like a child. Have some wine.”

“Leave me alone! I'm full. I couldn't touch another thing.”

“Come now, daughter. Drink with your beloved.”

Poxi said to herself: “I've given my heart to Zhang. Who wants to stay with this lout! But if I don't get him drunk I suppose he'll be wanting things from me.” She forced herself to down half a cup.

Mistress Yan laughed. “My girl is upset. Relax, have a few drinks and go to bed. Sir Clerk, drink your fill.”

Song Jiang couldn't resist her urgings. He drained four or five cups in a row. The old woman also had quite a few. She went downstairs to heat some more wine. She had been annoyed when her daughter refused to drink. Now that the girl had changed her mind she felt much better.

“If we can inveigle him into staying tonight,” she thought, “he'll get over being angry. The thing is to hang onto him for a while longer, then we'll see.”

By the stove, she drank another three cups. This only increased her craving, and she filled a bowl and downed that, too. Mistress Yan then poured half a kettle of heated wine into the pot and crawled back up the stairs. She found Song Jiang sitting in silence, with lowered gaze. Poxi, her head turned away, was toying with her skirt. The old woman laughed.

“You two aren't made of clay. Why don't you speak? Be a man, sir Clerk. All you have to do is show a little tenderness and whisper a few sweet nothings.”

Song Jiang didn't know what to do. He said not a word. To stay or go, both seemed wrong.

“You never come to see me,” Poxi thought, “and now you expect me to talk and play around with you as usual. Not a chance!”

Mistress Yan had drunk a lot of wine and she babbled all kinds of nonsense. Gossiping about this one, slandering that, she talked a blue streak.

While this was going on, Tang the Ox went looking for Song Jiang. Tang was a pedlar of pickled meats and vegetables who also managed to do some of hustling on the streets of the county town. Song Jiang often helped him

financially. Whenever Tang picked up a bit of useful information about court cases and litigants he let Song Jiang know, and the clerk gave him some money. And so, if Song Jiang ever had need of him, Tang went all out.

On this particular evening Tang had lost at gambling, and he went to the county office to put the touch on Song Jiang. But the clerk was nowhere to be seen.

“Who are you looking for in such great haste, brother?” asked one of Song's neighbors.

“What a thirst I've got. I'm looking for my patron, but he's not around.”

“Who is your patron?”

“Clerk of the county court, Song Jiang.”

“I saw him going off with Mistress Yan not long ago.”

“That daughter of hers is a dirty tramp. She and young Zhang are really hot for each other. The girl's cheating on Song Jiang. He probably got wind of it and stopped going there. Today, the old bawd must have tricked him into paying a visit. I've got no money and my throat is dry. I'll just drop by and borrow enough for a few bowls of wine.”

Tang headed for Mistress Yan's house. A lamp was burning and the door was not locked. As he reached the foot of the stairs he heard the old woman laughing wildly in the room above.

He tiptoed up the stairs and peered through a crack in the wall. Song Jiang and Poxi both were gazing downward. The old woman was sitting at the head of the table, jabbering twelve to the dozen. Tang stepped in and greeted each of them courteously. He remained standing near the entry.

“Just in time!” thought Song Jiang. He gestured with pursed lips.

Tang was a clever fellow. He got the signal. “I've been looking all over for you,” he said to Song. “And you've been here drinking, snug and peaceful,

right along!”

“Has something important happened at the county office?”

“You've forgotten, sir Clerk. It's about that matter that came up this morning. The magistrate is having fits in his chambers. He's sent four or five court attendants looking for you. His Worship is raising the roof. You'd better get going!”

“If it's that important, I suppose I must.” Song Jiang stood up and headed for the stairs. Mistress Yan stopped him.

“Don't pretend, sir Clerk. I know he's putting on an act.” She whirled to face Tang the Ox. “Tricky rogue! Think you can fool me? You've as much chance as taking the adze from Lu Ban the Great Carpenter! At this hour the magistrate is home drinking and merry-making with his wife. What official business would he bother about tonight? You can't diddle me with your phony stories!”

“The magistrate is really waiting for him. It's very urgent. I wouldn't he!”

“Dog farts! These old eyes are crystal clear. You saw the clerk signal with his mouth to invent a tale. Instead of encouraging him to stay, you try to lure him away! 'Killing can be forgiven, but never deception,' as the old saying goes.”

Mistress Yan jumped up, grabbed Tang by the neck with both hands, and rushed him stumbling down the stairs.

“Get your hands off my neck,” Tang yelled.

“You're ruining our business, cutting off our food and clothing! That's as bad as killing a man's parents or his wife! Make any more noise and I'll clobber you, you thieving beggar!”

Tang stepped up to her. “Let's see you hit me!”

Filled with the courage of wine, Mistress Yan slapped Tang so hard he staggered out backwards, taking the bamboo door curtain with him. The old

woman, swearing a blue streak, rolled up the curtain, put it inside, closed the double doors and bolted them firmly.

Tang the Ox bawled from the yard: “Dirty whore-monger, if it weren't for Clerk Song I'd smash your house to smithereens! You just wait. It I don't get you on an odd day, I'll get you on an even!” Cursing, he pounded his chest. “If I don't kill you my name isn't Tang!”

Mistress Yan went back up the stairs. “You shouldn't pay any attention to that beggar,” she said to Song Jiang. “He came to cadge the price of a couple of drinks. All he does is stir up trouble. A stinking wretch who'll die in the streets dares to come to my door with his quackery!”

Song Jiang was an honest fellow. Now that the old woman had seen through his attempt, he couldn't bring himself to leave.

“Don't hold this against me, sir Clerk. We know how good you are to us. Daughter, drink this cup with sir Clerk. You two haven't seen each other for a long time. I can imagine how eager you are to get to bed. I'll just straighten up a bit in here and go.”

She had two more cups with Song Jiang, collected the bowls and dishes, and went downstairs to the kitchen.

“I've heard that this girl and Zhang are hitting it off,” the clerk said to himself, “but I'm not sure. There's nothing I've seen with my own eyes. If I go now she'll think I'm a rube. Besides, it's late and I want to sleep. I may as well find out how this girl really feels about me.”

The old woman came up the stairs again and called: “It's late. Go to bed, you two.”

“Mind your business,” snapped Poxi. “Go to bed yourself!”

Mistress Yan laughed and went downstairs, saying: “Rest well, sir Clerk. Enjoy yourself. Take your time getting up in the morning.”

She put the kitchen in order, washed her feet, blew out the lamp, and retired. Song Jiang, sitting on the stool, glanced at the girl and sighed. It was already the second watch. Poxi lay down on the bed, fully clothed. She rested her head on her embroidered pillow, and rolled over facing the wall.

“The trollop goes to sleep without even looking at me,” Song Jiang thought irritably. “Her mother wangled me into coming here and plied me with wine. I can't keep my eyes open. It's late. I'd better get some rest.”

He removed his head kerchief and put it on the table, took off his tunic and hung it on the clothes rack. The sash around his waist, with its attached dagger and pouch, he draped over the bed rail. Then he pulled off his silk shoes and white socks and lay down with his head towards the girl's feet.

Half a watch later, he heard her snicker. Song Jiang was furious. How could he sleep? '“Joy regrets night's swift race. Misery hates its leaden pace,'“ he thought.

By the time the third watch had gone and the fourth begun, he was completely sober. At the fifth watch he got up, washed his face in the basin with cold water, dressed, tied his kerchief on his head. “Unmannerly slut,” he muttered.

Poxi heard him. She hadn't slept either. She turned around.

“You ought to be ashamed!” she retorted.

Swallowing his rage, Song descended the stairs.

Mistress Yan heard his footsteps and called from her bed: “Sleep a little longer, sir Clerk. Wait until daylight before you go. There's no reason to get up at the fifth watch.”

Song Jiang did not reply. He unbolted the door.

“If you must go, sir Clerk,” said the old woman, “pull the door closed behind you.”

Song Jiang did so. Still smoldering, he set out quickly for his quarters. As he was passing the magistracy, he saw down the street a small lampglow. Grandpa Wang, the medicinal broth seller, was coming to the square in front of the county office to catch the morning market.

The old man hailed him, “What are you doing up so early, sir Clerk?”

“I had too much to drink last night. Just now when I awoke I counted the beat of the watch drum wrong.”

“The wine surely upset your stomach. I've just the soup for that. Let me give you a bowl.”

“All right,” said Song Jiang. He sat down on a bench. The old man filled a bowl with thick broth and handed it to him.

As he was sipping it, Song Jiang thought: “I often drink his soups, and he never asks me to pay. Though I promised to buy him a coffin, I still haven't done it.”

He remembered the gold Chao Gai had sent and the bar he had selected and put in his pouch. “I'll give him the money now. That will make him happy,” he thought.

“Grandpa, I haven't given you the money yet I promised you for your coffin,” he said. “I have some gold here which you can have. Buy yourself a coffin and keep it in your home. When you reach a hundred and go to your final rest, I'll pay your funeral expenses.”

“You're always so good to me, benefactor, and now you give me money for a coffin. There is no way I can thank you in this life, but in my next incarnation I'll serve you as a donkey or a horse!”

“Don't talk like that.” Song Jiang pulled up the edge of his over-vest and felt for his pouch. He uttered a groan and thought: “I must have left it on that creature's bed rail last night. I was so angry I could think only of getting out, and forgot to put on my sash. The gold doesn't matter, but it's wrapped in Chao Gai's letter! I was going to burn it when I was with Liu

Tang in the tavern, but I was afraid he'd go back and say I treated his mission lightly. I decided to destroy it when I returned to my quarters, but Mistress Yan nabbed me before I could get there. Then last night I thought I'd burn it in the lamp. But I was afraid the girl would see and so I didn't do it. This morning I left in such a hurry I forgot it! I've often noticed Poxi looking at song sheets, which means she can read a bit. If she gets her hands on that letter, it will be very bad!”

He stood up and said: “Forgive me, grandpa. I meant what I said. But the gold is in my pouch, and I left home so quickly this morning I forgot it. I'll get it now.”

“Don't bother,” said the old man. “Any time will do.”

“You don't understand. I left something important with it. I need them both.”

Song Jiang set out rapidly for Mistress Yan's house.

Meanwhile, after Poxi heard Song leave, she got up. “That oaf kept me awake all night. Frozen face, hoping I'd apologize and be nice to him. I don't want him! Zhang and I get along fine. Who wants to bother with Song Jiang! If he doesn't come around, so much the better!”

She spread the quilt, took off her tunic and skirt, opened her chemise and stepped out of her slip. In the light of lamp by the bedside she saw the sash hanging on the rail. Poxi laughed.

“That black-faced rogue was so drunk he forgot his sash. I'll give it to my Zhang to wear.”

As she lifted it, with dagger and pouch attached, the pouch felt unusually heavy. Poxi opened it and spilled its contents on the table. Out came a gold bar and a letter. She picked up the gold bar, gleaming yellow in the lamplight.

“A gift from heaven,” she laughed. “My Zhang has been getting too thin. Now I can buy him some good things to eat.”

She put the bar down and opened the letter. She saw Chao Gai's signature, and what he had written.

“Aha!” she said. “I knew that the bucket went to the well, but here we have the well also coming to the bucket. Song Jiang is all that prevents me and Zhang from becoming man and wife. Today I've got him in the palm of my hand. So he's in cahoots with the bandits in Liangshan Marsh, and they've sent him a hundred ounces of gold. I'll fix him!”

She again wrapped the gold bar in the letter and put it in the pouch. “Even with five demons he won't snatch this away!” she said to herself.

Poxi heard the door downstairs squeak open, and the old woman call from her bed: “Who's there?”

“Me,” Song Jiang replied.

“I told you it was too early, sir Clerk, but you wouldn't listen. Now you've come back. Go up and sleep with Poxi. Wait until daylight, then leave if you must.”

The clerk made no reply, but mounted the stairs. Hearing that it was Song Jiang, the girl hastily rolled the pouch and dagger in the sash, got under the covers with the bundle, turned facing the wall, and pretended to snore.

Song burst into the room and went straight to the rail of the bed. His belongings were gone. The clerk was in a panic. He controlled his anger over the shabby way the girl had treated him all night and shook her by the shoulder.

“For the sake of my kindness to you before, give me back my pouch.”

Poxi continued to feign sleep. Song Jiang shook her again.

“Don't be angry. I'll apologize to you later.”

“I've been sleeping peacefully here. Who wakes me so rudely?”

“Quit acting. You know very well it's me.”

Poxi turned around. “Oh, Black-Face. What are you saying?”

“I want my pouch.”

“Did you put it in my hands? Why ask me for it?”

“I left on the rail at the foot of the bed. Nobody else has been here. You must have taken it.”

“A demon's run away with your wits!”

“I behaved badly last night. I'll apologize to you later. But you must return my pouch. Quit fooling around.”

“Who's fooling? I never took it!”

“You hadn't undressed before, or covered yourself with the quilt. You must have taken it when you got up and laid out the bedding.”

Poxi's lovely brows rose and her starry eyes widened. “Yes, I took it, and I'm not going to give it back. Now have me arrested as a thief!”

“I didn't say you stole it.”

“I'm not a thief, I'll have you know!”

Song Jiang's panic was growing. “I've treated you and your mother well. Give it back to me! I've things to do!”

“Always mumbling that I was carrying on with Zhang. He's not your equal in some ways, but at least he isn't a dirty criminal! He doesn't consort with bandits and robbers!”

“My darling sister, keep your voice down! If the neighbors hear, it won't be any joke!”

“If you're afraid people will hear, you shouldn't do such things. I'm going to hold on to that letter! I might return it, but you have to do three things, first.”

“I'll do thirty, gladly, to say nothing of three!”

“Maybe you won't agree.”

“Anything in my power, I'll do. What do you want from me?”

“First, give back my contract of sale to you, and write another transferring me to Zhang in marriage, with a guarantee that you'll never contest it.”

“Agreed.”

“Second, all the ornaments in my hair, the clothes on my body, the furnishings in the house, all come from you. Write another promise that you won't ask their return.”

“Agreed.”

“It's the third thing I'm afraid you'll balk at.”

“I've already agreed to two things. Why not a third?”

“I want those hundred ounces of gold Chao Gai sent you from Liangshan Marsh. In exchange, I'll let you off your 'top-magnitude crime', and return your purse and what's in it.”

“Your first two demands I've already agreed to. It's true I was sent a hundred ounces of gold, but I refused them, and told the man to take them back. If I still had the gold here I'd gladly present it to you with both hands.”

“Fine words! 'Money to an official is like blood to a fly.' They sent you gold and you turned it down? That's a farting lie! Among officials 'What cat doesn't eat meat?' Does the King of Hell let condemned souls go? Who do you think you're kidding? Give me that gold. What does it mean to you? If you're afraid it'll be identified as stolen goods, melt it down first!”

“I'm an honest man, you know that. I wouldn't lie. If you don't believe me, give me three days' time. I'll sell my family belongings and raise the money for you. Let me have my pouch.”

The girl laughed coldly. “Tricky, Black-Face, aren't you? Do you think I'm a child? I give you the pouch and letter today, and three days from now you give me gold? Not a chance! With one hand I take the money, with the other I release the goods. Let's have it, quick, and get this over with!”

“I don't have any gold, I tell you!”

“Is that what you're going to say when I accuse you in court this morning!”

At the mention of the word “court,” Song Jiang began to burn. He glared at the girl.

“Are you going to give it back or not?”

“Dare I refuse, with you so fierce?” she said sarcastically.

“You really won't give it back?”

“No, a hundred times no! I'll return it to you in the county court!”

Song Jiang grabbed the quilt covering Poxi and yanked it off. She didn't care about her nakedness, but lay huddled with the bundle clutched to her chest. Song recognized the fringe of his sash.

“So that's where it is!”

He seized the bundle with both hands. The girl wouldn't let go. Song hauled for dear life. Poxi clung in a death grip. The clerk gave another hard pull, and the dagger fell out on the mattress. He instinctively pounced on it. The girl looked at the dagger in his hand and screamed.

“Murder! Black-Face wants to kill me!”

It wasn't until then that the idea entered his mind. All his suppressed fury burst forth like a wave. Before Poxi could scream again he pushed her down with his left hand and with his right slit her throat. Fresh blood spurted. Poxi gurgled. Afraid she wouldn't die, Song Jiang slashed with his dagger once more. The girl's head dangled loosely on the pillow.

Song quickly unwound the pouch, extracted the letter and burned it in the lamp flame. He fastened the sash around his waist and went downstairs.

The old woman, lying in bed below, heard the quarrel, but hadn't paid much attention until her daughter screamed: “Black-Face wants to kill me!” Worried, she jumped out of bed, dressed, and hurried up the stairs. She collided with Song, who was just starting down.

“What are you two raising such a row about?” she demanded.

“Your daughter was insufferable! I killed her!”

“Now, now,” Mistress Yan smiled, “you may get angry easily, and be a little nasty when you're drunk, but you wouldn't kill anybody. Stop teasing.”

“If you don't believe me, go inside and see! I killed her, all right!”

“I don't believe it,” said Mistress Yan. She pushed open the door and looked. Her daughter's body lay in a pool of blood.

“Frightful,” she gasped. “How could you do such a thing!”

“I'm a man of principle. I won't run away. Do with me what you will.”

“The jade was no good. You weren't wrong to kill her. But now I've no one to support me in my old age.”

“That's no problem. You needn't worry, if that's how you feel. I have a bit of property. I can see to it that you have plenty of food and clothing for the rest of your days.”

“That's fine. I thank you, sir Clerk. But what are we going to do about burying my daughter?”

“Easy. I'll go and buy a coffin. When she's being placed in it, I'll deal with the coroner. And I'll give you another ten ounces of silver for funeral expenses.”

“We'd better get the coffin now, before daylight. We don't want the neighbors to see anything.”

“All right. Bring me a pen and paper and I'll write a note, then you go for the coffin.”

“Just a note won't solve anything. Unless you go in person, they won't deliver it quickly.”

“You're right,” said Song Jiang.

They went downstairs. The old woman took a lock and key from the kitchen, locked the house door behind them and put the key in her pocket. Then she and the clerk walked in the direction of the county office.

It was not yet daylight, but the gate of the magistracy was already open. As Mistress Yan and Song Jiang neared the left of the entry the old woman suddenly clutched him.

“I've got a murderer here!” she yelled.

Song Jiang nearly jumped out of his skin. He clapped a hand over her mouth.

“Shut up!”

But Mistress Yan continued her clamor. Several policemen ran over. They saw it was Song Jiang she was clinging to.

“Be quiet, woman,” they said. “Our clerk isn't that kind. Speak nicely, if you've anything to say!”

“He's a murderer! I've caught him and I'm taking him to the magistrate!”

Song Jiang had always been very kind, and he was well liked by everyone, above and below. There wasn't a person in the magistracy who didn't defer to Song Jiang. And so none of the policemen was willing to lay a hand on him. Besides, they didn't believe Mistress Yan.

At that moment Tang the Ox came by. He was carrying a tray of freshly washed pickled ginger for the early market held in front of the county office each morning. He saw Mistress Yan seize Song Jiang and heard her exclamations. Tang remembered the abuse he himself had taken from her the previous night. He put his tray down on one of the benches of Grandpa Wang, the broth seller, and rushed over.

“Old bawd,” he shouted. “Why are you handing on to our clerk?”

“Don't you let him get away,” Mistress Yan shrilled, “or you'll answer with your life!”

Tang the Ox was furious. He pried her hands loose and slapped her so hard she saw stars. She staggered dizzily and let go. Song Jiang walked directly into the market crowds. The old woman fastened herself on Tang.

“Clerk Song killed my daughter and you helped him escape!”

“How did I know!” Tang cried in confusion.

“Policemen, catch that murderer! Otherwise, you'll be implicated too!”

Song Jiang's prestige was so high that none of the police would touch him. But Tang the Ox was a different matter. They closed in swiftly. One of them took the old woman, and three or four grasped Tang and dragged him backwards into the magistrate's court.

Truly, calamity and happiness have no volition. Man brings them on himself. Go in a flaxen cape to put out a fire and you'll be consumed by flames.

Was Tang the Ox able to get free after being grabbed by Mistress Yan? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 22
Mistress Yan Raises a Row at the County Office
Constable Zhu Tong Gallantly Lets Song Jiang Escape

When the magistrate heard that the man the police had arrested was involved in a murder, he hastily came out and convened his court. In swarmed the policemen with Tang the Ox. The magistrate surveyed the people before him. To the left knelt a middle-aged woman, to the right a buffoon of a man.

“What's all this about a murder?” the official demanded. “My name is Yan,” said the woman, “and I had a daughter called Poxi. I sold her to Clerk Song Jiang as a concubine. Last night the three of us were drinking together. This Tang the Ox barged in and began making trouble. I cursed him and drove him out. All the neighbors know. This morning Song Jiang left early, but then he came back and killed my daughter. I was hauling him to the magistracy when Tang the Ox pulled him free. I beg for justice!”

“You dared to help the culprit get away?” the magistrate said to Tang. “I didn't know anything about it. I only went to her house to borrow a little money from Song Jiang for a few bowls of wine. She threw me out. This morning I was on my way to market with some pickled ginger and I ran into her tugging at Song Jiang in front of the county office. I walked over to calm them down, and Song left. How did I know he killed her daughter?”

“You're talking rot,” shouted the magistrate. “Song Jiang is an upright gentleman. He'd never kill anyone. The murderer must be you! Where are my officers?”

The court personnel were summoned. Zhang Wenyuan, on learning that Mistress Yan had accused Song Jiang of killing her daughter-and his mistress—drew up her allegations in a formal complaint and docketed it. He then called men from the coroner's office, and the local ward chief, plus several neighbors, and they went together to the house of Mistress Yan.

An examination of the corpse was conducted. Beside it lay the murderer's knife. A check revealed that death had been caused by cutting the victim's throat. The body was then placed in a coffin and removed to a monastery to await burial. The examining group returned to the county office.

The magistrate was very friendly with Song Jiang and wanted to exonerate him. He questioned Tang the Ox repeatedly. Each time, Tang said: “I know

nothing about it.”

“Why did you go to their house last night and raise a fuss? You must be involved.”

“I only wanted some money for wine....”

“Nonsense. Beat this lout!”

The attendants pounced on Tang like ravening beasts, trussed him up and gave him forty or fifty blows. But he stuck to his story. The magistrate knew Tang had nothing to do with the murder. It was only his anxiety to help Song Jiang that caused him to put Tang through this grilling. Finally, he had a rack fastened around Tang's neck and ordered that he be removed to prison.

Zhang Wenyuan respectfully approached the magistrate. “The knife we found is Song Jiang's dagger,” he said. “He ought to be brought in for questioning. Then we'll know where we stand.”

Zhang was persistent, and the magistrate couldn't very well refuse. He sent men to Song's quarters to get him. The clerk had already fled. The policemen came back with a few neighbors and reported: “The murderer has escaped. No one knows where he's gone.”

“His father Squire Song and his younger brother Song Qing live in Song Family Village,” said Zhang. “They can be arrested and held as sureties until Song Jiang is caught and questioned.”

The magistrate would have much preferred to fix the blame on Tang, and release him later after things cooled down. But Zhang had already prepared the necessary documents and instigated Mistress Yan to press her charges. The magistrate had no choice but to send two or three men with a warrant for the arrest of Squire Song and his son Song Qing.

They arrived at the Song family manor and the old man came out to greet them. When all were seated in the hall, they handed him the warrant, which he read.

“Please hear me, sirs. Our family have been farmers for generations,” he said. “We earn our living from these fields and orchards. But Song Jiang is an unfilial son. Since childhood he's been rebellious. He wouldn't accept his station in life, and insisted upon becoming a court officer in spite of my urgings. I therefore disinherited him a few years ago, officially, before the previous county magistrate, and had him stricken from the family register. He is no longer a family member. He has his own quarters in town, and I and my son Song Qing work our fields here in this little village. Song Jiang does not share our food. He has nothing to do with us. I was always afraid he would do something wrong and get us involved. So I had the magistrate give me a formal disinheritance certificate. I'll show it to you.”

Although the policemen knew this was an escape device, prepared long in advance, they were on very good terms with Song Jiang and wouldn't do anything to hurt him.

“We'll make a copy of it,” they said, “and bring it back to the magistrate.”

The squire feted them with dishes of chicken and goose, poured them wine, and presented them with a dozen ounces of silver. He produced the certificate and they copied it. Then they took their leave of the squire, returned to the county office and reported to the magistrate.

“Squire Song disinherited Song Jiang three years ago,” they said. “Here is a copy of the certificate. For that reason we were unable to bring the old man in.”

The magistrate was only looking for an excuse not to prosecute Song Jiang. “Squire Song has the certificate and Song Jiang has no other close relatives,” he said. “All we can do is offer a reward of a thousand strings of cash for his arrest. Have proclamations to that effect posted everywhere.”

At Zhang's instigation Mistress Yan again came before the magistrate, her hair dishevelled in a fine display of grief.

“Song Jiang must have been hidden by his brother Song Qing to avoid having to appear in this case! Why doesn't Your Worship arrest him and see to it that I get justice?”

“His father complained about his disobedience three years ago and had him officially stricken from the family register. He has a certificate to prove it. We have no grounds for bringing in the old man and his son as sureties for Song Jiang's arrest.”

“Your Worship, everyone knows that Song Jiang is called 'Filial and Gallant Dark Third Master'. That certificate is false! Justice, Your Worship, I beg you!”

“Poppycock! That certificate has my predecessor's official seal. How can it be false?”

Mistress Yan sobbed and lamented. “Your Worship, 'The importance of human life is vast as the sky!' If you don't give me justice, I'll have to appeal to the prefecture! My daughter suffered a cruel death!”

Zhang then spoke in Mistress Yan's behalf. “If you don't arrest Song Jiang, she'll go to the prefect, and that will be bad,” he warned. “Suppose the prefecture starts checking our handling of the case? I won't know what to say.”

Clearly there was reason in Zhang's words. The magistrate drew up the necessary papers and summoned constables Zhu Tong and Lei Heng.

“Take some men to the Song manor in Song Family Village and arrest the criminal Song Jiang.”

On receiving the written documents, the constables selected about forty soldiers and proceeded briskly to the manor of the Song family. The old man hastily emerged to greet them.

“Please don't blame us, Squire,” the constables said. “We're acting under orders. We have no choice. Where is your son, the clerk?”

“Song Jiang is an unfilial son. I have nothing to do with him. The previous magistrate separated him from us, as my certificate attests. Song Jiang was stricken from our family register over three years ago. He doesn't live with us and he never comes here.”

“We've been ordered to make an arrest,” said Zhu Tong. “I'm afraid we can't take your word for it. We'll have to search. Our superiors won't be satisfied with anything less.”

He ordered the soldiers to surround the manor, then said to Lei Heng:

“I'll guard the front gate. Constable Lei, you go in and search.”

Lei Heng entered the manor and explored it from end to end. Finally, he returned to the front gate.

“It's true. He's not in there,” he said to Zhu Tong. “I'd better make sure,” said Zhu Tong. “Constable Lei, you and our brothers guard the gate. I'm going to look the place over carefully, myself.”

“I'm a law-abiding citizen,” said Squire Song. “I wouldn't conceal anybody on the premises.”

“This is a murder case,” said Zhu Tong. “You must forgive us.”

“Go right ahead, Constable. Make a thorough search, by all means.”

“Constable Lei, you keep an eye on the squire. Don't let him leave.”

Zhu Tong entered the manor, leaned his halberd against the wall, bolted the manor gate, and went into the family chapel. He pulled the altar table to one side, raised a trap-door, and twitched a thin rope handing down.

Below, a bell tinkled. Soon after, Song Jiang emerged. He viewed Zhu Tong in amazement.

“Don't blame me, brother, for coming to arrest you,” the constable said. “You've always been very good to me, and we never concealed anything from each other. One day when we were drinking you told me: 'In front of the Buddha in my family chapel is an altar table. Beneath that is a trap-door leading to a concealment place below. You can use it if you ever have to hide out.' I remembered that, and today, when the magistrate sent me here with Lei Heng, against my will, I knew I'd have to find some way to cover for you. His Worship, the magistrate, also wants to help, but Zhang and

Mistress Yan have been threatening to go to the prefect if he doesn't pursue the case, so he had to send me and Lei Heng to search the manor. I was afraid Lei Heng might interpret his orders too strictly and, if he saw you, not be flexible enough. So I posted him at the front gate and came here to you directly. This hiding place isn't bad, but it's not really safe. Suppose someone found out about it and made a search? What could you do?”

“I've been thinking the same thing, myself,” said Song Jiang. “If it weren't for your kindness, brother, I'd be jailed in no time!”

“No need to talk like that. The question is where can you go that's safe?”

“There are three possibilities. One is in Henghai County of Cangzhou Prefecture—the manor of Chai Jin the Small Whirlwind. Another is in Fort Clear Winds in Qingzhou Prefecture-the home of Hua Rong, known as the Lesser Li Guang. A third is in Squire Kong's manor on White Tiger Mountain. He has two sons. Kong Ming, the elder son, is called the Comet. Kong Liang, the younger, is called Flaming Star. I met them both several times in our county seat. But I can't decide which of these three places is best.”

“Make up your mind quickly, brother, and act. You must go tonight. There's so time to lose!”

“I'll leave dealing with officials above and below entirely to you, brother. Come to the manor for whatever money you need.”

“Don't worry. I'll take care of everything. Just concentrate on getting away.”

Song Jiang thanked Zhu Tong and went back into his hideout. The constable replaced the trap-door and the altar table. He opened the door, picked up his halberd and came out.

“He's certainly not in the manor,” Zhu Tong announced. And he called to his confederate: “Constable Lei, we'll take Squire Song in, shall we?”

“Zhu Tong is on very good terms with Song Jiang,” Lei Heng mused. “Why does he want to arrest his father? That can't be what he means at all. If he

says it again, I'll show my own sympathy."

The two constables assembled their soldiers and re-entered the hall. Squire Song courteously served everyone with wine.

"Never mind the drinks," said Zhu Tong. "We have to ask you and your fourth son Song Qing to come with us to the county."

"Why haven't we seen him?" queried Lei Heng.

"I sent Song Qing to the village to have some farm tools made. He's not in the manor. As for that unfilial Song Jiang, I disinherited him three years ago. I have an official document here to prove it."

"There's no use your talking," said Zhu Tong. "We have orders from the magistrate to bring you and your fourth son in."

"Constable Zhu," said Lei Heng, "please listen to me. If Clerk Song committed a crime, there must be some reason. It may not be a capital offense. Squire Song has a certificate—bearing an official seal, so it can't be false. We ought to remember what a good friend Clerk Song has been to us in the past, and make some concessions. If we take back a copy of the certificate, that will be enough."

Zhu Tong said to himself: "I spoke that way deliberately to lull any suspicion Lei might have." Aloud he said: "Since that's how you feel, brother, I don't want to play the villain."

"I sincerely thank you both," said the old man fervently. He had wine served to all, and presented the two constables with twenty ounces of silver. Zhu Tong and Lei Heng turned the money over to their forty men to be shared among them.

After copying the certificate they bid farewell to Squire Song, left the village, and returned with their men to the county.

They went directly to the magistrate, who was holding court. He asked them for a detailed report.

“We searched the entire manor and all the settlements around it twice,” they said, “but Song Jiang was nowhere to be found. Squire Song is sick in bed and can't be moved. His condition is critical. Song Qing went away the month before last and still hasn't returned. For that reason, we were only able to bring you this copy of the certificate.”

“In that case...” said the magistrate. He drew up a report to the prefect above him and prepared a proclamation calling for Song Jiang's arrest. Of that we'll say no more.

Many in the county office who were friendly with Song Jiang spoke to Zhang Wenyuan on his behalf. Zhang didn't want to offend them. Besides, nothing could bring the girl back to life. Zhang himself had often received favors from Song in the past. And so he let the matter drop.

Zhu Tong gave a sum of money to Mistress Yan. He urged her not to appeal to the prefect. Since she accepted the compensation, she had no choice but to agree. He also sent a man with silver to the prefecture to see to it that no action was called for on the magistrate's report.

The magistrate issued a “Wanted” poster and an offer of a thousand strings of cash for Song Jiang's arrest. For “having let a criminal escape,” Tang the Ox was given twenty blows, tattooed on the cheek and exiled to a place five hundred *li* away. Those being held as witnesses were released under bond and sent home.

Song Jiang's family were farmers. Why did they need a concealment cellar? Because in the Song Dynasty it was easy to get along if you were an official, but very difficult if you were a small functionary. Why do we say that? Wicked ministers held sway in the imperial court. They used only their intimates and relatives and grabbed every penny they could lay their hands on. What was so hard about being a functionary? When a clerk committed a blunder in those days, if let off lightly he'd be tattooed and exiled to a wild and distant military outpost. If given the full penalty under the law he would be executed and all his property confiscated. It was wise to have a hiding place prepared in advance.

And to prevent his parents from becoming involved, he had them declare him unfilial and stricken from the family register. They obtained an official certificate as proof. He lived away from home, and had nothing to do with them, conducting all family business secretly in his private quarters. Many a man made such arrangements in the Song Dynasty.

To get back to Song Jiang. He emerged from the underground concealment and discussed the problem with his father and brother. “If it weren't for Zhu Tong,” he said, “I would have been caught and prosecuted. We mustn't forget to repay his kindness. Now, brother and I must flee. If Heaven pities us and a general amnesty is declared, we shall return and see you again, father. Send money to Zhu Tong secretly, and ask him to use it discreetly above and below. Tell him to give some also to Mistress Yan, so that she won't appeal and make difficulties.”

“You can rest assured about that,” said his father. “Be careful on the road, both of you. When you reach your destination, send me a letter, if you find a trustworthy messenger.”

The two brothers tied their belongings into packs during the night. At the fourth watch they rose, washed, had breakfast, and got ready to go. Song Jiang was wearing a white felt hat with a broad brim, a white silk robe, a plum-pink sash, leggings and hemp sandals. Song Qing was dressed as a servant and carried the packs. They kowtowed and said goodbye to their father in front of the hall. None of them could restrain their tears.

“There is a long road ahead of you,” said Squire Song. “Stay out of trouble.”

Both sons instructed the vassals to look after the manor and take good care of the old man, and make sure he had plenty to eat. Then they looked on their swords, picked up their halberds and left the Song Family Village.

It was late autumn and early winter, and they moved along briskly. “With whom should we cast in our lot?” they wondered, after covering several stages.

“In the gallant fraternity I have often heard the name Lord Chai, of Henghai County in the prefecture of Cangzhou,” Song Qing remarked. “They say he is the direct descendant of the emperors of Later Zhou. Of course, I've never met him. Why don't we put ourselves under his protection? He's chivalrous and generous, they say, and cordially receives all bold fellows and helps men in exile. He's the living incarnation of hospitable Meng Changjun. We ought to join him.”

“That's what I've been thinking,” Song Jiang responded. “Though we haven't met, he and I have been keeping up a correspondence.”

They headed for Cangzhou, crossing mountains and streams, passing county towns and prefectural cities. Travellers stopping at inns must be careful of two things—eating from infected bowls and sleeping in beds where men have died.

But to get back to our story. After several days the brothers came to the borders of Cangzhou. They asked directions to Lord Chai's manor and, when they arrived there, addressed one of his vassals.

“Is Lord Chai at home?”

“No. He's gone to the eastern manor to collect grain rents.”

“How far is it from here?” asked Song Jiang.

“Over forty *li.*”

“How do we get there?”

“May I presume to ask your names, sirs?”

“I am Song Jiang, from Yuncheng County.”

“Not Clerk Song, known as Timely Rain?”

“The same.”

“Lord Chai speaks of you often, and says how sorry he is that you and he have never met. I'll be glad to show you the way.”

The vassal led Song Jiang and his brother to the eastern manor. They reached it in less than three watches.

“If you two gentlemen will wait in this pavilion,” said the vassal, “I will inform the lord that you are here.”

“Good,” said Song Jiang.

He and Song Qing entered the mountainside pavilion, rested their halberds, removed their swords and packs, and sat down.

Not long after the vassal departed, the central gate of the manor opened and Lord Chai came running out, followed by four or five attendants. He rushed up to the pavilion and dropped to his knees before Song Jiang.

“If you knew how I've been thinking of you! What heavenly wind brings you here? Nothing in my life have I wanted more. What wonderful luck!”

Song Jiang also fell on his knees and kowtowed. “Though only a distant petty functionary, I've come especially to see you!”

Lord Chai raised him up. “The lamp wick flowered last night, and this morning a magpie called. I didn't realize these were portents of your visit, brother!” His face was wreathed in smiles.

Song Jiang was delighted with the warmth of his reception. He introduced his brother.

“Take Clerk Song's luggage,” Lord Chai instructed his servants. “They'll be staying in the west room of the rear hall.” He led Song Jiang by the hand into the main hall, where they seated themselves as host and guests.

“If you don't mind my asking, brother,” said Lord Chai, “how were you able to find time from your duties in Yuncheng County to come to our insignificant village?”

“For a long time your fame has thundered in my ears, my Lord. Although I received letters from you frequently I never could pay my respects in person because unfortunately my humble office always kept me busy. I'm a man of no talent, and I've done a stupid thing, and now my brother and I must find refuge. We recalled your chivalry and generosity, and we've come here hoping to join you.”

Lord Chai smiled. “Don't worry, brother. Even if you committed the gravest crime you'd be safe here. I'm not boasting, but there isn't a police chief or army officer who dares cock an eye at our little manor.”

Song Jiang gave a complete account of how he killed Yan Poxi. Again Lord Chai smiled.

“Forget it. Even if you killed an official appointed by the imperial court or robbed the government treasury, I'd have no compunctions about concealing you here.”

He invited the two brothers to bathe, and presented them with fresh clothing, kerchiefs, silken shoes and clean stockings. They bathed, put on their new garments, and a vassal brought their original clothes to their room. Lord Chai invited them to the rear hall where wine and tidbits had been prepared.

Their host asked Song Jiang to sit at the head of the table, while he seated himself opposite. Song Qing sat down at the side. A dozen or so ranking vassals and several overseers were also present. By turns they toasted the guests and waited on them, joining in the merriment. Lord Chai repeatedly urged the brothers to drink without restraint. Song Jiang thanked him again and again. By the time they had drunk half their fill the three were expressing the highest mutual regard and admiration.

Day was drawing to a close, and lamps were lit. “Enough of wine,” Song Jiang begged. But Lord Chai wouldn't hear of it. They continued drinking until the first watch. Song Jiang rose to relieve himself. His host directed a vassal to light his way with a lantern to the end of the eastern veranda.

“I'll have to miss the next round,” said the clerk. He made a wide detour and came out of the front porch, crossed the courtyard diagonally and mounted the veranda running along the eastern wing.

Song Jiang was eight-tenths drunk, and he staggered along, not looking where he walked. A big fellow, chilled by a malarial attack, was on the veranda huddled over some burning embers on a shovel. Song Jiang, head high, stepped on the handle and bounced the embers into the man's face, startling him so that he broke into a sweat. Angrily he rose and grasped Song Jiang by the front of his tunic.

“Who are you, you son of a bitch, that you think you can play games with me!”

Song Jiang was surprised speechless. But the vassal carrying the lantern cried out: “Don't be rude! He's his lordship's most favored guest!”

“Guest, guest,” the man muttered. “I was a guest too, at first, and 'most favored' as well. But Lord Chai listens to the lies of his vassals, and has become distant towards me! How true it is that 'friends don't last forever'!”

He pulled back his fist to hit Song Jiang. The vassal dropped his lantern, rushed forward and intervened. But he couldn't separate the two men. Three more bobbing lanterns came flying in their direction.

“I couldn't find you, sir Clerk,” said the voice of Lord Chai, as he quickly approached. “What's all the fuss?”

The vassal explained about the shovel. Lord Chai smiled.

“Do you know this illustrious clerk?” he asked the big fellow.

“Illustrious, my foot! Compared to our Clerk Song of Yuncheng, he's nothing!”

Lord Chai laughed. “Have you met Clerk Song?”

“We've never met, but the whole gallant fraternity has heard of Song the Timely Rain! He's world famous.”

“What's he famous for?”

“It would take too long to tell it all, but he's real hero. What he starts, he finishes! As soon as I get over this illness, I'm going to join him.”

“Would you like to meet him?”

“Who wouldn't!”

“Bit fellow, he's as far as a hundred and eighty thousand *li*, and as near as right in front of you!” Lord Chai pointed at Song Jiang. “This is Song the Timely Rain!”

“You're not joking?”

The clerk said: “My name is Song Jiang.”

The big fellow stared, then dropped to his knees and kowtowed. “I never dreamed I'd meet you today, brother!”

“I don't deserve such courtesy.”

“But I was just very discourteous. I beg your pardon. I 'have eyes but didn't recognize Mount Taishan'!” The man remained kneeling.

Song Jiang hastily raised him to his feet. “What is your honorable name, sir?”

Lord Chai told Song Jiang the name of the man and where he hailed from. Truly, meeting a tiger in the mountains or bandits in the forest strikes terror to the traveller's heart. But awe at this man's name caused the stars to pale and the rivers to run backwards.

Who, then, did Lord Chai say he was? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 23
Lord Chai Accommodates Guests in Henghai County
Wu Song Kills a Tiger on Jingyang Ridge

Lord Chai supplied the answer. “He is called Wu Song. He's from Qinghe County, and is the second son in his family. He's been here a year.”

“I've heard his name many times in the gallant fraternity. I never thought I'd run into him today. How fortunate!”

“Truly a happy circumstance when men of courage meet,” said the lord. “Let's sit inside, shall we, and talk.”

Song Jiang, very pleased, walked hand in hand with Wu Song to the rear hall, where the clerk introduced him to his brother. Chai Jin asked Wu Song to be seated. Song Jiang requested him to sit at the head of the table, but Wu Song refused. After some minutes of polite argument, Wu Song took the third seat. Chai Jin called for wine and urged his three guests to drink without restraint.

In the lamplight Song Jiang noted with pleasure what a fine figure of a man Wu Song was, and he asked: “How do you happen to be here?”

“I was drunk one day back in Qinghe County and got into a brawl with the keeper of confidential documents in the local government office. With one blow of my fist I knocked him senseless to the ground. I thought I'd killed him, and ran away and took refuge here in lord Chai's manor. That was over a year ago. Later I learned that the fellow hadn't died, that he revived. I intended to go home and see my older brother, but then I caught this malaria and wasn't able to leave. I had the chills and was warming myself by a fire when you stepped on the handle of that shovel. You gave me such a start that I broke into a sweat. It seems to have cured my illness!”

Song Jiang was very glad, and the four men drank until the third watch. The clerk asked Wu Song to live with him and his brother in the west wing. When they arose the next day, Lord Chai had a sheep and a pig slaughtered and gave a feast for Song Jiang. Of that we'll say no more.

Several days later Song Jiang gave Wu Song money so that he could make some clothes. Lord Chai heard about it, and absolutely refused to let the clerk spend anything. He took fine silk material from his own stores and had his private tailor make garments for each of his three guests.

Why, incidentally, had Chai Jin cooled toward Wu Song? When he first arrived, he was treated with the same hospitality as any other guest. But he often got drunk, and he had a bad temper. When he didn't like the service, he would beat the vassals. None of them had a good word to say for him, and they frequently complained about him to Chai Jin. Although the lord didn't ask him to go, his manner grew distant. But after Song Jiang took him in hand, and they drank together every day, Wu Song no longer indulged in his former failings.

The two were constantly in each other's company for a dozen or more days. But Wu Song was homesick. He wanted to go back to Qinghe County and see his older brother. Chai Jin and Song Jiang urged him not to hurry away. But Wu Song said: “I'm concerned about my brother. I haven't heard from him in a long time.”

“If you must go,” said Song Jiang, “we won't keep you. Come and see us again, if you have the chance.”

Wu Song thanked him. Chai Jin gave the young man some money.

“I have caused you a great deal of trouble, my Lord,” said Wu Song.

He wrapped his belongings into a pack, tied on his staff and got ready to leave. Chai Jin gave him a farewell feast. Wu Song was wearing a new red silk robe and a broad-brimmed hat of white felt. He shouldered his pack, took up his staff, and bid his friends goodbye.

“Wait a moment, brother,” said Song Jiang. He went back to his quarters, got some silver, and hurried with it to the manor gate. “We'll see you down the road a piece,” he said.

He, his brother Song Qing, and Wu Song took their leave of Lord Chai. “I'll be back soon, my Lord,” said Song Jiang. The three men left the eastern

manor.

“This is far enough, brother,” said Wu Song, after they had travelled six or seven *li*. “Please go back. Lord Chai is waiting.”

“Just a bit more,” said Song Jiang.

They chatted as they walked, and covered another three *li* before they knew it. Wu Song took Song Jiang's hand.

“Don't come any further, brother. 'Though you see a friend off a thousand *li*, sooner or later you must part.' Isn't that how the saying goes?”

“Only a few steps more. On the highway ahead there's a little tavern. We'll have a couple of cups and then separate.”

The three entered the tavern, and Song Jiang sat at the head of the table. Wu Song, resting his staff, sat opposite. Song Qing took a seat on the side. The clerk ordered wine and some food to go with it. By the time they had downed several cups, the sun was in the western sky.

“It's getting late,” said Wu Song. “If you don't scorn me, please receive my four kowtows and accept me as your blood brother.”

Song Jiang was delighted. Wu Song made four obeisances. The clerk had Song Qing present him with ten ounces of silver. Wu Song tried to refuse.

“You need that money yourself.”

“Don't give it a thought. If you don't take it, I won't acknowledge you as my brother.”

Wu Song had no choice but to accept with thanks. He put the money in his purse. Song Jiang paid the bill, Wu Song took up his staff, and the three left the tavern. There were tears in Wu Song's eyes when they parted. Song Jiang and Song Qing watched from the door of the tavern until he was out of sight, then they started back.

They were met by Chai Jin, riding his horse and leading two other animals, before they had gone five *li.* Gratefully, they mounted and returned together. Chai Jin invited them into the rear hall for wine. Thereafter, they continued staying at his manor.

We'll divide our story in two and talk now of Wu Song after he left Song Jiang. That night he put up at an inn. The next morning he rose and had breakfast, paid the bill, tied his pack, took up his staff and set forth.

“Song Jiang is known in the gallant fraternity as Timely Rain,” he thought. “He certainly deserves his name! I'll never regret becoming friends with a brother like that!”

He travelled for several days and came to Yanggu County. It was noon and he was a good distance from the county town, and he was hungry and thirsty from walking. Further up the road he saw a tavern. By the doorway hung a pennant reading: *Three bowls and you can't cross the ridge.*

Wu Song went inside, sat down, and rested his staff. “Wine, quickly, host,” he called.

The tavern keeper brought three bowls, a pair of chopsticks and a plate of tidbits, placed them on the table, and filled one of the bowls to the brim with wine. Wu Song raised the bowl and drained it.

“This wine has a kick in it! If you've got anything filling, host, I'll buy some to go with the drinks.”

“We only have cooked beef.”

“Slice me two or three catties of the best part.”

The host went back inside and came out with two catties of beef on a large platter, which he placed before Wu Song. Then he filled another bowl. Wu Song drank it.

“Very good wine!” he said. And he downed another. That was his third bowl. The host poured no more. Wu Song rapped on the table.

“Host, where's the wine?”

“More beef sir? Coming right up.”

“I want beef and wine, both.”

“I'll slice some beef for you, but I can't give you any more wine.”

“That's screwy! Why not?”

“Didn't you see that pennant hanging by my door *Three bowls and you can't cross the ridge!”* queried the tavern keeper.

“What does it mean?”

“Although our wine is just a village product, it's as fragrant as the old brews. Any traveler who drinks three bowls of it gets drunk and can't cross that ridge there. Hence, the name. No one who stops here ever asks for more than three bowls.”

Wu Song smiled. “So that's it. I've had three bowls. Why aren't I drunk?”

“My wine is called 'Seeps Through the Bottle Fragrance'. It's also called 'Collapse Outside the Door'. You don't feel anything at first. But a little later, down you go.”

“Poppycock! I'm paying, aren't I? Pour me three more bowls!”

Seeing that the wine had little effect on Wu Song, the tavern keeper again filled three bowls with wine. The big fellow drank them.

“Excellent,” he cried, “Host, I'll pay you bowl for bowl. Just keep pouring.”

“You'd better take it easy, sir. This wine really knocks people out! And there's no medicine that brings them around!”

“Bullshit! Even if you doped it, I've got a nose, haven't I!”

The tavern keeper couldn't convince him. Again he filled the three bowls.

“Bring me another two catties of beef,” said Wu Song.

The host served the sliced meat and poured three more bowls of wine. Wu Song's appetite seemed to improve. He put some silver on the table.

“Look here,” he called. “Is this enough for the wine and meat?”

“Plenty,” said the tavern keeper. “In fact I owe you some change.”

“I don't want any change. Just keep the wine coming.”

“There are five or six bowls left. But I doubt that you can finish them.”

“Five, six, or even more, I'll drink as many as you've got.”

“You're a big hulking fellow. If you fall, how am I going to pick you up?”

“If you have to pick me up, I'm no real man!”

The host continued to stall. Wu Song grew irritated. “I'm paying for what I drink,” he said. “Don't make me mad, or I'll smash up your place and turn it ass over tea kettle!”

“This rogue is drunk,” thought the tavern keeper. “I'd better not provoke him!”

He served Wu Song six more bowls of wine, a total of eighteen in all.

Wu Song grasped his staff and rose to his feet. “I'm not a bit drunk!” He laughed as he went out the door. “Who says 'Three bowls and you can't cross the ridge'?” He started walking away.

The tavern keeper ran after him. “Where are you going, sir?” he shouted.

Wu Song halted. “What's it to you? I don't owe you anything, do I? What are you yelling about?”

“I mean well. Come back. I want to show you a government proclamation.”

“What does it say?”

“There's a fierce tiger with a white forehead and bulging eyes on Jingyang Ridge. It comes out at night, and has already killed nearly thirty strong men. The authorities have ordered hunters to capture it, on pain of being beaten, and have posted this warning at every path leading to the ridge. It says travellers must go in groups and cross only between late morning and early afternoon. At all other times the ridge is closed. No one is permitted to travel alone. It's already late, and I saw you setting off without a word. I don't want you to kill yourself! Why not spend the night at my place, and then tomorrow you can gradually get together a band of twenty or thirty travellers and cross the ridge in safety.”

Wu Song laughed. “I'm a Qinghe County man. I've crossed that ridge at least twenty times. I've never seen any tiger. Don't try to scare me with that crap. Even if there is a tiger, I'm not afraid.”

“I'm only trying to save you. If you don't believe me, come in and have a look at the proclamation.”

“Balls! I'm not scared of any tiger. You want to keep me here so that in the middle of the night you can rob me, kill me! That's why you're trying to frighten me with your tiger story!”

“All right! You take my good for evil and talk to me like that! Don't believe me, then! On your way!” The tavern keeper shook his head and went back inside.

Staff in hand, Wu Song strode off towards Jingyang Ridge. After walking four or five *li* he came to the foot of it. A piece of bark had been peeled from a large tree, and on the white patch words were written. Wu Song could read quite well, and he saw that it was a notice with this inscription: *Of late a tiger on Jingyang Ridge has been killing people. Travellers must*

form bands and cross only between late morning and early afternoon. Do not take risks.

Wu Song grinned. “That host is a crafty one. Scares his customers into staying the night. Well, he can't scare me!”

He proceeded up the slope, holding his staff level. It was late afternoon by then, and the red sun was pressing on the mountains in the west. Still primed by all the wine he had consumed, Wu Song continued climbing the ridge. Before he had gone another half *li* he came upon a dilapidated Mountain Spirit Temple. A notice was posted on the door. It read:

Yanggu County Notice: Lately, a big tiger has been killing people on Jingyang Ridge. Although all township leaders, village chiefs and hunters have been ordered to capture the beast or be beaten, they have so far failed. Travellers are permitted to cross the ridge only between late morning and early afternoon, and only in bands. At other times, and to single travellers at any time, the ridge is closed, lest the tiger take their lives. Let this be known to all.

So there really was a tiger! The notice with its official seal confirmed that. Wu Song considered returning to the tavern. But then he said to himself: “If I do that, the host will laugh at me for a coward. I can't go back.” He thought a moment. “What's there to be afraid of,” he exclaimed. “Just keep climbing and see what happens.”

He walked on. The warmth of the wine rose in him, and he pushed back the felt hat till it was hanging by the string on his shoulders. Clapping the staff under one arm, he plodded up the slope. When he looked back at the sun, it was almost gone. The days are short in late autumn, and the nights are long. It gets dark early.

“There isn't any tiger,” he said to himself. “People just scare themselves and don't dare come up the mountain.”

The wine was burning inside him as he walked. With his staff in one hand, he unbuttoned his tunic with the other. His gait was unsteady now, and he staggered into a thicket. Before him was a large smooth rock. He rested his staff against it, clambered onto its flat surface, and prepared to sleep.

Suddenly a wild gale blew, and when it passed a roar come from behind the thicket and out bounded a huge tiger. Its malevolent upward-slanting eyes gleamed beneath a broad white forehead.

"Aiya!" cried Wu Song. He jumped down, seized his staff, and slipped behind the rock.

Both hungry and thirsty, the big animal clawed the ground with its front paws a couple of times, sprang high and came hurtling forward. The wine poured out of Wu Song in a cold sweat. Quicker than it takes to say, he dodged, and the huge beast landed beyond him. Tigers can't see behind them, so as its front paws touched the ground it tried to side-swipe Wu Song with its body. Again he dodged, and the tiger missed. With a thunderous roar that shook the ridge, the animal slashed at Wu Song with its iron tail. Once more he swivelled out of the way.

Now this tiger had three methods for getting its victim—spring, swipe and slash. But none of them had worked, and the beast's spirit diminished by half. Again it roared, and whirled around.

Wu Song raised his staff high in a two-handed grip and swung with all his might. There was a loud crackling, and a large branch, leaves and all, tumbled past his face. In his haste, he had struck an old tree instead of the tiger, snapping the staff in two and leaving him holding only the remaining half.

Lashing itself into a roaring fury, the beast charged. Wu Song leaped back ten paces, and the tiger landed in front of him. He threw away the stump of his staff, seized the animal by the ruff and bore down. The tiger struggled frantically, but Wu Song was exerting all his strength, and wouldn't give an inch. He kicked the beast in the face and eyes, again and again. The tiger roared, its wildly scrabbling claws pushing back two piles of yellow earth and digging a pit before it. Wu Song pressed the animal's muzzle into the

pit, weakening it further. Still relentlessly clutching the beast by the ruff with his left hand, Wu Song freed his right, big as an iron mallet, and with all his might began to pound.

After sixty or seventy blows the tiger, blood streaming from eyes, mouth, nose and ears, lay motionless, panting weakly. Wu Song got up and searched around under the pine tree until he found the stump of his broken staff. With this he beat the animal till it breathed no more. Then he tossed the staff aside.

“I'd better drag this dead tiger down the mountain,” he thought. He tried to lift the beast, lying in a pool of blood, but couldn't move it. He was exhausted, the strength gone out of his hands and feet.

Wu Song sat down on the rock and rested. “It's nearly dark,” he thought. “If another tiger comes I won't be able to fight it. I'd better get off this ridge first, somehow. Then, tomorrow morning, I can decide what to do.”

He collected his broad-brimmed felt hat from beside the rock, skirted the thicket, and slowly descended the ridge. Wu Song had travelled less than half a *li* when two tigers leaped out of the tall dry grass.

“Aiya!” he exclaimed. “I'm a goner!”

But there in the shadows the two tigers suddenly stood upright. He looked closely and saw that they were men with tiger pelts bound tightly around them. Each held a five-pronged pitchfork. They stared at Wu Song in amazement.

“Have you eaten a crocodile's heart, or a panther's gall, or a lion's leg, that you're so full of courage?” they cried. “How dare you cross the ridge at dusk, alone and weaponless? Are you a man or a demon?”

“Who are you two?” Wu Song demanded.

“We're local hunters.”

“What are you doing on this ridge?”

“Don't you know?” the hunters asked in surprise. “There's a big tiger up here! It comes out at night and preys on people. It's killed seven or eight of us hunters alone, and more travellers than we can remember! The county magistrate has ordered the township and village leaders and us hunters to capture it. But it's so powerful nobody dares go near it! We've been beaten time and again because of this, but we still can't catch the beast. Tonight it's our turn to try. We've got a dozen peasants with us, and we've laid spring-bows with poisoned arrows all over the place. We were waiting here in ambush when we saw your big form moving down the ridge. You scared the life out of us! Who are you, anyway? Have you seen the tiger?”

“I'm a Qinghe County man. My name's Wu, a second son. I just met the tiger up there beside a thicket. I punched and kicked it to death.”

The hunters gaped. “You're kidding!”

“Look at the blood on my clothes if you don't believe me.”

“How did it happen?”

Wu Song told them the whole story. The two hunters listened, joyous and astonished, then shouted for their peasant band. The men soon crowded round, carrying pitchforks, snare-bows, knives and spears.

“Why weren't they with you?” Wu Song asked the hunters.

“The tiger was too fierce. They didn't dare come up.” The hunters repeated Wu Song's story to the peasants. None of them believed it.

“Come along with me, then,” said Wu Song, “and see for yourself.”

They had flint and steel and struck a fire, and lit six or seven torches. They went with him up the ridge to where the tiger lay dead in a great heap. Everyone was delighted. A man was sent immediately to report to the village chief and the leading family in charge. Five or six peasants trussed up the tiger and carried it down the ridge slung from a pole.

When the party reached the foot of the ridge seventy or eighty people were already waiting, noisy and animated. They formed a procession, with the dead tiger in front, and Wu Song following on an open litter, and marched to the home of the leading family.

Both the head of the family and the village chief were waiting to welcome him at the entrance to the village. The tiger was placed in front of a hall. Another twenty or thirty men—hunters and the heads of prominent township families—also greeted Wu Song.

“What is you name, young stalwart,” they asked, “and where are you from?”

“I'm from the neighboring county of Qinghe. My name is Wu Song, and I'm a second son. On my way home from Cangzhou yesterday afternoon I got drunk in a tavern on the other side of the ridge. I climbed the ridge and met the tiger.” He told in detail how he fought the beast with fists and feet.

“Truly, a hero,” his listeners cried.

The hunters presented him with game and drank his health. Wu Song was exhausted from his battle with the tiger and wanted to sleep. The head of the leading family ordered his vassals to prepare a guest-room for Wu Song's use. He sent word to the county seat the following morning, and had a special litter built so that the tiger could be delivered there.

Wu Song got up at daybreak, washed and rinsed his mouth. His host and the others brought a cooked sheep and two buckets of wine to the front of the hall to feast him. Wu Song put his clothes on, adjusted his head kerchief, and went out and joined them. Raising their cups, they toasted him.

“That tiger killed countless people, and for that reason the hunters were beaten several times,” they said. “But you came, young stalwart, and rid us of that calamity, bringing us luck and making the road safe for travel! We owe everything to you!”

“I have no talents. I was only borrowing from your predestined good fortune.”

Everyone congratulated Wu Song, and they drank all morning. The tiger was placed upon the Utter. Members of the prominent families draped Wu Song with silks and flowers. His luggage was placed in safe-keeping, then everyone marched through the village gate. Emissaries of the magistrate had long since been waiting to escort Wu Song to the Yanggu County office. They greeted him, and ordered four vassals to convey him in an open sedan-chair. Decked with silks and flowers, he followed behind the tiger as the procession advanced on Yanggu County.

When the townspeople heard that a brave young fellow had killed the big tiger on Jingyang Ridge, they all turned out, cheering, and swarmed to the county office. From his sedan-chair, Wu Song looked at the noisy throngs crowding every street and lane. Everyone wanted to see the tiger. The magistrate was waiting in a hall inside the county office compound.

Wu Song descended from the sedan-chair, slung the great beast over his shoulders, walked up to the hall, and placed the tiger in the entrance way. The magistrate gazed at the strapping young man, then at the huge striped animal, and he thought: “No one else could have killed that tiger!”

He summoned Wu Song into the hall. Wu Song hailed him respectfully.

“How were you able to kill the beast?” the magistrate asked.

Wu Song told his story. Everyone listened in stupefaction. The magistrate gave him several cups of wine, and rewarded him with one thousand strings of cash contributed by the prominent families.

“It was only because I was basking in Your Excellency's lucky aura that I was able to kill the tiger. I have no ability of my own,” said Wu Song. “How can I accept any reward? I've heard that, because of the tiger, Your Excellency punished the hunters several times. I'd like to give the thousand strings of cash to them.”

“If that's how you feel, it's up to you.”

Wu Song promptly distributed the money among the hunters. The magistrate, impressed by his generosity and honesty, decided to raise him in

rank.

“Although you are from Qinghe, it's very close to our Yanggu County,” he said. “I'm thinking of making you a constable here. How about it?”

Wu Song dropped to his knees. “If your Excellency favors me I'll be grateful all my life!”

The magistrate instructed his clerk to draw up the appropriate documents that very day commissioning Wu Song a constable in the police force. All the heads of the leading families came and congratulated him, and drank with him for four or five consecutive days.

“I wanted to go home to Qinghe and see brother,” Wu Song said to himself. “Who would have thought I'd wind up a constable in Yanggu!”

Thereafter, he had the affection of his superiors and was famed throughout the countryside.

Two or three days later, he was leaving the county office in search of amusement when a voice hailed him from behind.

“You're fallen into luck, Constable Wu! Is that why you don't know me any more?”

Wu Song turned around. *“Aiya,”* he exclaimed. “What are you doing here?”

If Wu Song had not met that man would bloody corpses have lain in Yanggu? And as a result heads rolled as steel blades swished, and hot blood flowed as fine swords flashed.

Who was the person who called to Wu Song? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 24
For Money Mistress Wang Arranges a Seduction
In Anger Yunge Riots in the Tea-Shop

Constable Wu fell to his knees and kowtowed, for it was none other than his brother, Wu the Elder. “I haven't seen you for over a year,” said Wu Song. “What are you doing here?”

“You were gone a long time. Why didn't you write? Sometimes I reproached you in my heart, and yet I missed you.”

“How is that?”

“When I remembered how you used to get drunk in Qinghe Town, and brawl and be hauled into court, and how I used to suffer, waiting for the judge's decision, with never a moment's peace, I thought of you with reproach. Recently I took a wife, but the men of Qinghe are bold, and they kept trying to take advantage, and I've had no one to protect me. If you were home, which of them would have dared to so much as fart? Things got so bad I had to move here to Yanggu and rent a house. That was when I missed you.”

Reader, please note, these two were born of the same mother. But Wu Song was tall and handsome and enormously strong. Otherwise, how could he have killed the fierce tiger? Wu the Elder was very short, with an ugly face and a ridiculous head. He was known in Qinghe as Three Inches of Mulberry Bark.

Now, it happened that a wealthy family there had a maidservant by the name of Pan Jinlian. In her early twenties, she was quite pretty, and the master of the house began pestering her. Jinlian, or Golden Lotus, didn't want him, and told his wife. He hated her so much for this that he personally provided her with a dowry and married her off to Wu the Elder, free of charge.

Several of Qinghe's dissolute idlers began visiting Wu's house and behaving provocatively. Since nothing about her husband pleased the girl—he was short and grotesque, and had no flair for merry-making whatever—Golden Lotus was quite ready to take a lover. It got so that dandies hanging around outside the door would say openly in front of the timid, law-abiding Wu: “Imagine that luscious piece of meat landing in a dog's jaws!”

* The couple couldn't remain in Qinghe. We and Golden Lotus moved to Yanggu Town, and rented a house on Purple Stone Street. Every day, Wu went out and peddled buns. He was doing this in front of the county office when he saw Wu Song.

Now he said: “The other day I heard people talking on the street, all excited, about how some stalwart named Wu had killed a tiger on Jingyang Ridge, and how the county magistrate appointed him constable. I was pretty sure it was you. Today, at last, we've met. I won't bother selling any more buns. I'll take you home.”

“Where is your house, brother?”

Wu the Elder pointed. “On Purple Stone Street, up ahead.”

Wu Song carried his brother's shoulder-pole and hampers and Wu the Elder led the way. They wound through several lanes until they came to Purple Stone Street. The house was beside a tea-shop.

“Wife, open the door,” Wu the Elder shouted.

A bamboo curtain was raised, and a woman appeared. “What are you doing home so early?” she asked.

“Your brother-in-law is here. I want you to meet him.” Wu the Elder took his carrying-pole and wares inside, then emerged again and said: “Come in, brother, and meet your sister-in-law.”

Wu Song raised the curtain and entered.

Wu the Elder said: “This is my younger brother. And what do you think — he's the one who killed the tiger on Jingyang Ridge and was made a constable!”

Golden Lotus clasped her hands in greeting. “I wish you every good fortune.”

“Please be seated, sister-in-law.” Wu Song dropped to his knees like a collapsing mountain of gold, like a falling pillar of jade, and kowtowed.

Golden Lotus raised him up. “You embarrass me,” she courteously protested.

“My respects, sister-in-law.”

“I heard from Mistress Wang, next door, that a hero who had killed a tiger was being welcomed at the county office. I wanted to go and see but I was delayed and got there too late. And all along it was you, brother-tin-law! Please come upstairs and sit a while.”

The three mounted the stairs and sat down. Golden Lotus looked at her husband. “I'll keep brother-in-law company. You prepare some food and drink so that we can entertain him.”

“Fine,” said Wu the Elder. “Sit a while, brother. I'll be back soon.” He went downstairs.

Golden Lotus gazed at the handsome figure of Wu Song. “He's so big,” she thought. “You'd never know they were born of the same mother. If I could have a man like that I wouldn't have lived in vain! With the one I've got I'm cursed for good! Three Inches of Mulberry Bark— three-tenths man and seven-tenths monster. What filthy luck! Wu Song beats up tigers. He must be very strong.... And I hear he's not married. Why not get him to move in? Why would have thought I was fated to meet my love here!”

Her face wreathed in smiles she asked: “How long have you been in town?”

“Ten days or more.”

“And where are you staying?”

“For the time being in the county office compound.”

“That can't be very convenient.”

“I live alone. My needs are simple. I have a soldier orderly.”

“A man like that can't do things properly. Why don't you move over here? Anything you want to eat or drink I'll be glad to make for you. Much better

than having some dirty orderly do it. Even if it's only clear water, when you drink it in this house you have nothing to worry about.”

“That's very kind of you.”

“Do you have a wife? I'd like to meet her.”

“I've never married.”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-five.”

“Three years older than me. Where were you before coming to this town?”

“I lived in Cangzhou for over a year. I thought brother was still in Qinghe. I didn't know he had moved here.”

“I can't begin to tell you! That man is too honest. I've seen it ever since I married him. People tried to take advantage. We just couldn't remain in Qinghe, so we moved here. If we had a big strong fellow like you staying with us, no one would dare abuse us.”

“Brother has always been well-behaved. He's not a rowdy like me.”

“Why turn things upside-down?” the girl smiled. “As the old saying goes: 'There's safety only in a stiff backbone.' I make up my mind fast, and act. I hate the slow dawdling types who never give you a direct answer.”

“At least he doesn't get into trouble and worry you.”

While they were talking, Wu the Elder returned with the food and wine he had bought and put them in the kitchen. He went to the foot of the stairs and called: “Wife, come down and get thing ready.”

“Where are your manners?” Golden Lotus retorted. “I can't leave brother-in-law just sitting here.”

“Don't bother about me,” said Wu Song.

“Get Mistress Wang from next door to do it,” the girl said to her husband. “Can't you manage even a simple thing like that!”

Wu the Elder asked Mistress Wang over. When the food was ready he carried it up and put it on the table. Besides Fish, meat, fruit and vegetables, there was also heated wine. Wu the Elder placed his wife at the head of the table and Wu Song opposite. He himself sat at the side and poured the wine. Golden Lotus raised her cup.

“Forgive our poor fare,” she said to Wu Song. “Please drink this one with me.”

“Thank you, sister-in-law. No need to be polite.”

Wu the Elder was so busy warming the wine and refilling the cups he had no time for anything else. Golden Lotus was all smiles.

“You haven't touched the fish or meat,” she cried. She picked choice morsels and put them on Wu Song's plate.

Wu Song was a straightforward fellow who thought of her only as a sister-in-law. She, from her years as a maidservant, had learned how to please in small ways. Wu the Elder, a timid person, knew little about entertaining guests.

After they had downed several cups, Golden Lotus frankly ran her eyes over the younger man's body. Embarrassed, Wu Song kept his head down and avoided her gaze. They finished a dozen or so cups, and he rose to leave.

“Have a few more first,” Wu the Elder pleaded.

“This is quite enough,” said Wu Song. “I'll be coming to see you again.”

His hosts walked with him down the stairs. “You must move over here,” Golden Lotus said. “Otherwise, people will laugh at us. After all, you're our own brother.” She turned to her husband, “We'll clean out a room for him and have him move in. We don't want the neighbors criticizing.”

“You're right,” said Wu the Elder. “Move in with us, brother, and I'll be able to hold up my head.”

“If that's what you both want, I'll bring my things over tonight.”

“Don't forget,” said Golden Lotus. “I'll be waiting.”

Wu Song said goodbye, left Purple Stone Street and returned to the county office. The magistrate was holding court. Wu Song made a request.

“I have a brother on Purple Stone Street. I'd like to sleep at his place. I could be here the rest of the time, awaiting orders. But I don't want to move without Your Worship's permission.”

“Naturally I won't hamper fraternal devotion. Just make sure you get here every morning.”

Wu Song thanked the magistrate and went to pack his belongings—his new clothes and the reward money. He had a soldier carry them to his brother's house. Golden Lotus greeted him with such smiling joy you'd think she'd found a treasure in the middle of the night!

Wu the Elder had a carpenter partition off a room for him downstairs, and put in a bed, a table, two stools and a charcoal brazier. Wu Song arranged his belongings and let the soldier go. After a night's sleep, he rose early the next morning. Golden Lotus got up quickly and brought him water to wash and rinse his mouth with. Wu Song performed his ablutions, tied on his head kerchief and left to sign in at the magistracy.

“Come home early for lunch,” his sister-in-law called. “Don't eat any place else.”

“I'll be back soon,” said Wu Song. He attended all morning to business, then returned to the house.

Golden Lotus had washed her hands and done her nails. She looked very neat and trim. She served the food, and the three of them ate at the same

table. After the meal Golden Lotus ceremoniously, with both hands, gave Wu Song a cup of tea.

“I'm too much trouble to you,” he said. “I don't feel right about it. I'll get a soldier from the county to help.”

“How can you treat us like strangers?” the girl protested. “You're not just anyone, you're our own flesh and blood! With a soldier the kitchen would never be clean. I couldn't stand having that kind of lout around!”

“In that case I'll just have to impose on your kindness.”

Enough of idle chatter. After Wu Song moved in, he gave his brother silver to buy tea and tidbits and invite the neighbors. They in turn chipped in and bought gifts for Wu Song. Wu the Elder, then felt constrained to invite them to a meal. All of this is by the way. A few days later Wu Song presented his sister-in-law with a piece of silk of beautiful hue suitable for making clothes. She smiled gaily.

“You shouldn't have done it! But since you already have, I suppose I can't refuse. I'll just have to accept.”

From then on Wu Song lived in his brother's house, and Wu the Elder continued to peddle buns on the street. Every morning Wu Song signed in at the magistracy and performed his duties. Whenever he returned home, whether early or late, Golden Lotus had food ready. She served him with obvious pleasure. It rather embarrassed him. She was always dropping subtle hints. But Wu Song was a man of solid virtue, and he paid no attention.

To make a long story short, a little more than a month had gone by, and winter was setting in. The wind blew for days, heavy clouds gathered. Then one morning thick snowflakes began to fall. It was still snowing at the first watch that night.

Wu Song left early the next morning to sign in at the magistracy. By noon he still hadn't returned. Golden Lotus sent her husband out to peddle buns,

and asked her next-door neighbor Mistress Wang to buy some wine and meat for her. The girl lit the charcoal brazier in Wu Song's room.

“I'm really going to tempt him, today,” she said to herself. “I don't believe he can't be aroused....”

She stood alone by the door curtain watching the snow till she saw him coming through the falling flakes of white jade. She raised the curtain and greeted him with a smile.

“Cold?”

“Thanks for your concern.” He entered and removed his wide-brimmed felt hat. She took it from him with both hands. “Don't trouble,” he said. He took it back, shook the snow from it and hung it on the wall. He untied the sash from around his waist, divested himself of his outer tunic of parrot-green silk, went into his room and hung it up to dry.

“I've been waiting for you all morning,” the girl said. “Why didn't you come home for lunch?”

“A man in the county office invited me. Just now another fellow suggested we drink. But I wasn't in the mood, and come straight home.”

“Oh. Warm yourself by the fire.”

“Right.” He took off his oiled boots, put on a pair of socks and warm shoes, pulled a stool over beside the fire and sat down.

Golden Lotus bolted the front door, closed the back door, brought in wine and food and tidbits and placed them on the table.

“Where has brother gone that he's not back yet?” Wu Song asked.

“Out selling buns, as he does every day. We can have a few cups of wine, just the two of us.”

“Hadn't we better wait for him?”

“Why should we?” The girl picked up the cylindrical container that the wine was heating in.

“Don't bother, sister-in-law,” said Wu Song. “I'll do it.”

“Thank you,” said Golden Lotus. She too pulled a stool over to the brazier and sat down. On the table, which was near the fire was a tray with wine cups. The girl raised a Ml one and looked at Wu Song.

“Drink it down.”

He took the cup from her and drained it. She refilled it. “It's cold today. You'd better have a double.”

“As you say.” Wu Song finished this one off, too. He poured a cup and handed it to the girl. She drank it, poured more wine from the heating container and placed it in front of him.

Her swelling bosom slightly exposed, her hair hanging down in a soft cloud, Golden Lotus smiled bewitchingly. “Someone told me you're keeping a girl singer in the east part of town. Is it true?”

“You shouldn't listen to such nonsense. I'm not that kind of person.”

“I don't believe you. I'm afraid you say one thing and do another.”

“Ask my brother, if you don't believe me.”

“What does he know? If he knew about things like that, he wouldn't be a seller of buns. Have another drink.”

The girl poured him three or four cups in succession, and had the same number herself. Warmed by a rising, uncontrollable passion, she talked more and more freely. Wu Song understood most of what she said. He kept his eyes down.

Golden Lotus went out to get some more wine. When she came back, Wu Song was poking up the fire in the brazier. Holding the container in one hand, she placed the other on his shoulder and squeezed.

“Is that all the clothing you're wearing in this cold weather?”

Annoyed, he said nothing. She took the poker from him.

“You don't know how to stir up a fire. I'll show you. The idea is to get it good and hot.”

Wu Song was frantic with embarrassment. He didn't reply. But the girl was blinded to his state of mind by the urgency of her desire. She put down the poker, poured a cup of wine, drank a mouthful and offered Wu Song the rest.

“Finish this, if you have any feeling for me.”

He snatched the cup and flung its contents on the floor.

“Have you no shame!” he cried. He gave her a push that nearly knocked her off her feet. Wu Song glared.

“I'm an upstanding man with teeth and hair who holds his head high, not some wicked immoral animal! Stop this indecent behavior! If I hear any whispering about you, watch out! My eyes may recognize you as a sister-in-law, but my fists won't! Let's not have any more of this!”

Crimson, the girl pulled her stool away. “I was only joking! Why are you making such a fuss? Have you no respect!”

She removed the cups and plates to the kitchen and left Wu Song fuming in his room.

Early in the afternoon Wu the Elder came home, carrying his shoulder-pole and hampers. He pushed the locked door a few times, and Golden Lotus hurriedly opened it. He set down his equipment and followed her into the kitchen. Her eyes were red from weeping.

“Who did you quarrel with?” he asked.

“It's all your fault for being such a softy! Letting people pick on me!”

“Who would dare?”

“You know very well! That nasty brother of yours! He came back in the big snow and I served him wine. When he saw no one was around, he tried to get fresh!”

“My brother isn't like that. He's always been very well behaved. And keep your voice down! If the neighbors hear, they'll laugh at us!”

Wu the Elder turned away from his wife and went to Wu Song's room. “Brother,” he said, “you haven't eaten yet. We'll have something together.”

Wu Song didn't reply. He thought for several minutes, then removed his shoes and socks, put on his oiled boots, his outer tunic and broad-brimmed felt hat, fastened his waist sash and headed for the door.

“Where are you going?” Wu the Elder called.

Wu Song silently continued upon his way.

Wu the Elder returned to the kitchen. “He wouldn't talk to me. He just went off down that street to the magistracy,” Wu the Elder said to his wife. “What's wrong with him?”

“You dolt,” cried Golden Lotus. “Is that so hard to figure out? He's ashamed, he can't face you, so he left! I forbid you to let that knave live in this house ever again!”

“We'll be scoffed at if he moves out.”

“Idiot! I suppose we won't be scoffed at if he makes passes at me! Live with him if you like! I'm not that kind of a woman! Just give me an annulment paper and you can have him all to yourself!”

Wu the Elder didn't dare open his mouth.

At that moment Wu Song arrived with a soldier and a parrying-pole. He went into his room, packed his belongings, and left again. Wu the Elder ran after him.

“Brother,” he said, “why are you moving?”

“Don't ask. If I spoke, it would only be hanging out the sign-board of just what kind of merchandise you've got in there! Let me go!”

Wu the Elder was stricken dumb. Wu Song departed, while Golden Lotus cursed.

“Good riddance! Everyone thought how nice to have a constable who looked after his brother and sister-in-law. Little did they know what a traitor he was! 'The prettiest papayas are emptiest inside.' There never was a truer word. He's moved, thank Heaven and Earth! Now at least we don't have an enemy right under our noses!”

Her husband couldn't understand her rage. Unhappiness began to gnaw at his heart with nagging persistence.

Thereafter Wu Song maintained quarters in the county office compound. Wu the Elder peddled his buns on the street as usual. He wanted to go and see Wu Song, but his wife issued strict injunctions against “provoking” him, so in the end Wu the Elder abandoned the idea.

Time flowed by, and soon the snow was gone. Another ten days or so passed. The county magistrate in the two and half years since he had assumed office had accumulated a large hoard of gold and silver. He wanted to send it to a member of his family in the Eastern Capital to hold for him, using part to buy him a higher post. But he needed an able, trustworthy person to deliver the money, so that it wouldn't be robbed in transit. Suddenly, the magistrate thought of Wu Song.

“The very man. A hero like that would be ideal.”

He summoned Wu Song and said: “I have a load of gifts and a letter I want to send to a relative in the Eastern Capital. But I'm afraid there may be trouble on the road and need a hero like you to bring them. Do this for me, and don't be afraid of the difficulty. I'll reward you well when you return.”

“Your Excellency has raised me in rank. I can't refuse. If you give me this task, of course I'll go. Besides, I've never been to the Eastern Capital. I'd like to see it. Get the things ready, Your Excellency, and I'll leave tomorrow.”

The magistrate was very pleased. He favored Wu Song with three cups of wine. Of that we'll say no more.

Wu Song went to his quarters, took some silver, got a soldier, bought a bottle of wine and food and tidbits, and proceeded to Wu the Elder's house on Purple Stone Street. When the older brother returned from bun selling, he found Wu Song sitting outside his door. He told the soldier to go into the kitchen and prepare the meal.

Golden Lotus still had a yen for Wu Song. She saw him arrive with food and wine, and she thought: “The knave must have me on his mind, so he's come back! I'm too much for him! I'll get the story out of him gradually.”

She went upstairs, put on fresh make-up, fixed her hair, and changed into more alluring clothes. She greeted Wu Song at the door.

“Have we offended you in some way? You haven't been here for days! I don't understand it. I told your brother to go to you in the county office and apologize, but he couldn't find you. Now, happily, today you've come! But you shouldn't spend money like this!”

“I've something to say,” replied Wu Song. “I've come specially to speak to you both.”

“Well, then, come upstairs and sit.”

The three mounted the stairs and entered the parlor. At Wu Song's insistence, his brother and sister-in-law sat at the head of the table. He moved a stool over and sat at the side. The soldier brought up the meat and wine and placed it before them. Wu Song urged Wu the Elder and Golden Lotus to drink. She kept giving him coy glances, but he concentrated on his wine.

After five rounds, Wu Song had the soldier fill a pledge cup with wine. Holding it, he faced his brother.

“I've been given a mission to the Eastern Capital by our magistrate. I'm leaving tomorrow. I'll be gone for forty or fifty days, maybe two months. There's something I must say, first. You've always been weak and timid, and people may try to take advantage when I'm not around. If you sell ten trays of buns a day usually, from tomorrow on don't sell more than five. Leave the house late and come back early. Don't drink with anybody. And when you get home, lower the curtain and bolt the door. In that way you'll avoid arguments. If anyone insults you, don't quarrel. I'll take care of him when I come back. Pledge me this, brother, with this cup.”

Wu the Elder accepted the cup from Wu Song's hand. “What you say is right, and I agree.” He drank the wine.

Wu Song poured a second cup and turned to Golden Lotus.

“Sister-in-law is clever. There's no need for me to say much. My brother is a simple, honest fellow. He needs you to look after him. 'Inner force counts more than outward strength,' as the saying goes. With you running the house properly, he'll have nothing to worry about. As the ancients put it: 'When the fence is strong no dogs get in.'”

A flush crept from the girl's ears till her whole face was suffused. She shook her finger at Wu the Elder.

“You filthy thing! What rumors are you spreading—slandering me? I'm as tough and straightforward as any man! A man can stand on my fist, a horse can trot on my arm! I can show my face proudly anywhere! I'm not one of those wives you need be ashamed of. Ever since I married you, not so much as an ant has dared enter your house! What's this about fences not being strong and dogs getting in? Before you talk wild, you'd better be able to prove it! Every dropped brick or tile must come to earth!”

Wu Song smiled. “Since that's how you feel sister-in-law, that's fine. Just make sure your deeds correspond to your words. I'll remember what you've said. I ask you to drink to it.”

Golden Lotus thrust the cup aside and ran out of the room. Halfway down the stairs she shouted: “You're so smart. Haven't you heard 'An elder brother's wife deserves the respect you give a mother'? When I married your brother I never even heard of you. You come here, I hardly know you, and you try acting like a father-in-law! Just my luck to run into all this shit!”

Weeping, she went downstairs, putting on a big show of injured innocence.

The brothers drank several more cups of wine, then Wu Song rose to leave.

“Come back soon,” said Wu the Elder. “I want to see you again.” There were tears in his eyes. Wu Song saw them.

“Don't go out selling buns, brother,” he urged. “Stay home. I'll send you money for your expenses.”

Wu the Elder walked down the stairs with him and saw him to the door.

“Don't forget what I've told you, brother,” Wu Song said.

He returned to the county office compound with the soldier and prepared for the journey. Early the next morning he tied up his pack and went to see the magistrate. The official's cases were already loaded on a cart. The magistrate selected two strong intelligent soldiers, plus two trusted servants to go with Wu Song, and gave them private instructions. Then all bid farewell to the magistrate. Wu Song buckled on his armor and took his halberd. The five of them, guarding the cart, left Yanggu Town for the Eastern Capital.

Our story now divides in two parts. We'll talk of Wu the Elder. His wife reviled him for four full days after Wu Song departed. Wu the Elder took her abuse in silence, and remembered his brother's words. He sold only half as many buns as before and came home early. No sooner did he rest his carrying-pole than he lowered the bamboo curtain, bolted the front door and sat himself down. Golden Lotus fumed with resentment. She shook her finger at him.

“Wretched imbecile! I've never seen a house where they close the bloody door when the sun is only halfway across the sky. People will jeer that we're warding off demons! You just listen to your brother's dirty mouth. You don't care that others may laugh!”

“Let them laugh, let them say what they like. My brother's advice is good. It will prevent all sorts of trouble.”

“Dolt! You're a man. Why can't you make up your own mind instead of listening to someone else?”

Wu the Elder waggled his hand firmly. “I'm going to do what Wu Song said. His words are pure gold.”

For another two weeks she rowed with him about his unvarying schedule. But then she became accustomed to it, and when he was due to come home she lowered the bamboo curtain and bolted the door herself. Wu the Elder was relieved. “It's much better this way,” he said to himself.

Another two or three days passed, and winter was nearly over. There was more sunlight, the weather was slightly warmer. Golden Lotus, expecting her husband home shortly, went to the door with a forked pole to lower the curtain over the entrance way.

But then something happened. A man was passing by. As the old saying goes: “Without coincidence there would be no story.” The pole she was holding slipped and landed right on the man's head. Angrily, he halted and turned around, ready to blast. But when he saw the lissome creature standing there, he promptly cooled down. His rage went sailing off to Java, and he smiled.

The girl clasped her hands and curtsied apologetically. “I was careless and you've been hurt!”

Adjusting his head kerchief, the man bowed. “It doesn't matter. Think nothing of it.”

Mistress Wang, the girl's neighbor, observed all this through the screen of her tea-shop door. She laughed. “Who told you to walk so close to the eaves of the house,” she called. “Serves you right!”

The man smiled. “It's my own fault. I bumped into the lady. I hope she'll forgive me.”

Golden Lotus also smiled. “Then you're not angry?”

Again the man laughed. He gave her a sweeping bow. “I wouldn't dare.” His eyes roved over her boldly, then he swaggered off with measured pace.

Golden Lotus let down the curtain, took the pole inside, bolted the door, and waited for Wu the Elder's return.

Do you know who that man was? Where he lived? Originally from one of the wealthier Yanggu families, he had come down in the world and opened a drug and medicine shop in front of the county office. He was smooth and cunning, and skilled with fists and stave. Recently, he had grown quite rich again, acting as a go-between in litigation making deals, passing money, corrupting officials. The whole county treated him with careful deference. His family name was Ximen, his given name Qing.

Being a first son, he had been known as Ximen the Elder. But when he again became wealthy, people called him the Right Honorable Ximen.

Shortly after his encounter with Golden Lotus, Ximen returned, entered Mistress Wang's tea-shop and sat down by the screen.

“Right Honorable,” grinned Mistress Wang, “that was quite a bow you gave out there.”

Ximen chuckled. “Tell me, godmother, whose woman is that pullet next door?”

“She's the King of Hell's kid sister, daughter of his commanding general. Why do you ask?”

“I'm serious. Give me a straight answer.”

“You mean to say you don't know her husband? He peddles food outside the county office every day.”

“Not Xu San who sells date pudding?”

Mistress Wang waved her hand negatively. “No, though they'd make a good pair. Guess again.”

“Li Er the silver carrier?”

“No, though they also would be well matched.”

“It couldn't be Lu Xiaoyi with the tattooed arms?”

Mistress Wang grinned. “No. They'd be a fine team, though. Guess again, Right Honorable.”

“Godmother,” said Ximen, “I really can't imagine.”

Mistress Wang laughed. “This'll kill you. Her old man is Wu the Elder who sells hot buns!”

Ximen howled and stamped with laughter. “Not Three Inches of Mulberry Bark?”

“The very same.”

Ximen groaned. “Such a delicious morsel landing in a dog's mouth!”

“A real pity,” Mistress Wang agreed. “But life is like that. 'A magnificent steed gets a dolt for a rider, a charming wife sleeps with an oaf of a husband,' as the saying goes. The marriage god makes some crazy matches.”

“What do I owe you for tea?”

“Not much. Let it go. We'll add it up some other time.”

“Who is your son working for these days?”

“I hate to tell you. He went up the Huaihe River with a merchant and still hasn't returned. Who knows whether he's alive or dead!”

“How would you like him to work for me?”

Mistress Wang smiled. “If Your Honor were willing to raise him up, that would be fine.”

“Wait till he gets back. We'll figure out something.”

They chatted a while longer. Ximen thanked Mistress Wang and left. Less than half a watch later, he was sitting by her door screen again, gazing at Wu the Elder's house. Mistress Wang came out from the back of the shop.

“A *mei* plum drink, Right Honorable?”

“Excellent. Make it good and sour.”

She soon placed the drink before him respectfully, with both hands. He slowly sipped the concoction, then set the cup down on the table.

“You make very good sour plum drinks, godmother. Do you have a lot in stock?”

Mistress Wang laughed. “I've been making *mei* all my life, but I don't keep anyone here!”

“I was talking about sour plum drinks and you're talking about making matches! There's a big difference.”

“Oh. I thought you wanted to know whether I was a good matchmaker.”

“Since that's your line, godmother, I like you to make a match for me, a first-rate one. I'll reward you well.”

“If your wife hears about this she's liable to box my ears!”

“My wife is very tolerant. I already have several concubines at home, but none of them please me. If you know someone suitable, don't hesitate to

speak. Even a woman who was married before will do, as long as I find her to my liking.”

“I came across a good one the other day, but I'm afraid you won't want her.”

“If she's really good, you arrange it for me, and I'll thank you.”

“A very handsome woman, but a bit mature.”

“A year or two's difference in our ages won't matter. How old is she?”

“She was born in the year of the tiger. At New Year's she'll be exactly ninety-three!”

Ximen laughed. “You're mad! Always joking!”

Still chuckling, he stood up and left. Day was drawing to a close. Mistress Wang had just lit the lamp and was getting ready to lock up for the night when Ximen again flitted in and sat down by the door screen, facing the house of Wu the Elder.

“How about a nice 'get together' drink, Right Honorable?” suggested Mistress Wang.

“Fine. I'd like it a bit sweet.”

She brought the beverage and handed it to him. He sat a while, drinking, then rose once more.

“Put it on my bill, godmother. I'll pay you tomorrow.”

“No hurry. Rest peacefully, and drop in again soon.”

Ximen laughed. Nothing further happened that night.

Early the next morning when Mistress Wang opened her door and looked outside, there was Ximen, walking back and forth in front of the shop.

“That stud sets a fast pace,” she said to herself. “I'll spread a little sugar on the tip of his nose, just out of reach of his tongue. He's great at wheedling favors in the county office, but I'll show him that he can't get anything from me on the cheap!”

She opened the door wide, started the fire, put the kettle on. Ximen entered immediately and sat down by the door screen, his eyes on the bamboo curtain before Wu the Elder's door. Mistress Wang pretended not to notice, and remained in the rear, fanning the fire.

“Godmother,” Ximen called. “Two cups of tea, please.”

“So it's you, Right Honorable,” Mistress Wang grinned. “Haven't seen you in days. Have a chair.”

She set two cups of strong ginger tea on the table before him.

“Have one with me,” Ximen invited.

“I'm not your dearie,” the old woman cackled.

Ximen also laughed. “Godmother,” he queried, “what do they sell next door?”

“Steaming, dripping, hot, spicy, delicious goodies.”

Ximen grinned. “You really are a mad woman!”

“Not a bit of it,” laughed Mistress Wang. “But she has a husband.”

“I'm serious. They say he makes very good buns. I'd like to order forty or fifty. Do you know whether he's home or not?”

“If it's buns you want, wait till he returns. No need to go to his house.”

“You're quite right.” Ximen sat a while, drinking his tea. He stood up. “Put it on the bill, godmother.”

“Don't worry. I'll do that all right.”

Ximen smiled and departed.

Soon afterwards, Mistress Wang, tending her shop, glanced outside. Ximen was again pacing in front of the door. He walked to the east, and gave a look. He walked to the west, and looked again. Seven or eight times he did this, then once more entered the tea-shop.

“A rare visit, Right Honorable!” Mistress Wang hailed him. “It's been a long time!”

Ximen smiled. He took out a piece of silver and handed it to her. “This is for the tea, godmother,” he said.

“It doesn't amount to all this much.”

“Just hang on to it.”

“Got him!” the old woman thought with inner satisfaction. “The stud is really hooked.” She put the money away and said: “You look thirsty. A cup of steeped broad-leafed tea—now, that's what you want.”

“How did you guess?”

“Easy. I could see it in your expression. 'One look at a man's face tells you whether he's prospering or suffering,' as the old saying goes. Not even the strangest things get by me.”

“I have something on my mind this minute. I'll give you five pieces of silver if you can guess what it is.”

Mistress Wang grinned. “I don't need three or four guesses. One is enough. Right Honorable, bring your ear down to me. All your coming and going these last two days is because of that person next door. Right?”

Ximen smiled. “Godmother, you're a shrewd woman. To tell you the truth, ever since she beaned me with the pole and I got a good look at her that day, I've been entranced! But I don't know how to get to her. Have you any ideas?”

Mistress Wang laughed uproariously. “Right Honorable, I'll give it to you straight. This tea-shop is just a front—'the devil playing night watchman'. From the snowy morning on the third day of the sixth month three years ago when I sold my first cup of steeped tea, I've never done much business here. My real trade is in the 'mixed market'.”

“What do you mean: 'mixed market'?”

“Mainly, I'm a match-maker. But I'm also a broker, a midwife, a lovers' go-between, and a bawd.”

“Godmother, if you can bring this off for me, I'll give you ten pieces of silver to pay for your coffin.”

“Listen to me, Right Honorable. These seduction cases are the hardest of all. There are five conditions that have to be met before you can succeed. First, you have to be as handsome as Pan An. Second, you need a tool as big as a donkey's. Third, you must be as rich as Deng Tong. Fourth, you must be as forbearing as a needle plying through cotton wool. Fifth, you've got to spend time. It can be done only if you meet these five requirements.”

“Frankly, I think I do. First, while I'm far from a Pan An, I still can get by. Second, I've had a big cock since childhood. Third, my family has a bit of change. Maybe not as much as Deng Tong, but enough. Fourth, I'm very forbearing. Even if she struck me four hundred blows, I'd never return one, Fifth, I've plenty of time. Otherwise, how could I keep hanging around here? Godmother, you must help me. If we succeed, I'll pay you heavily.”

“Right Honorable, although you say you meet the five requirements, there's still another stumbling block.”

“What's that?”

“Forgive me if I'm blunt, but these seduction cases are very tricky. Every bit of the money needed must be provided. You mustn't hold back even one penny out of a hundred. You've always been a little tight-fisted. You don't like to throw your money around. That's going to stand in our way.”

“We can cure that easily enough. I'll simply do what you say.”

“If you're willing to spend the money, Right Honorable, I can arrange a meeting between you and the pullet. But you have to promise me something.”

“Anything you want. What's your plan?”

“It's late, today. Come back in three months or half a year and we'll discuss this some more.”

Ximen knelt at her feet. “Quit kidding around, godmother,” he begged. “You've got to do this for me!”

Mistress Wang chuckled. “Impatient, aren't you? I have a plan, and it's a good one. It may not be foolproof, but it's ninety per cent sure. Now here's what we do: This girl was the goddaughter of a wealthy Qinghe family, and she's a fine seamstress. You go out and buy me a bolt of white brocade, a bolt of blue silk, a bolt of white silk gauze, and ten ounces of good silk floss and have them delivered here. I'll go over to the girl's house and have a cup of tea with her. I'll say: 'A kind gentleman has given me some material for burial garments. Would you please look in your almanac and see what's an auspicious day for me a hire a tailor?' If she doesn't respond, then that's the end. If she says: 'I'll make them for you,' and tells me not to bother about a tailor, then we've scored one point out of ten. I'll ask her over to my place. If she won't come and says: 'Bring the material here,' then that's the end. If she's pleased, and agrees, we've scored point two.

“When she comes, the first day, I'll have some wine and tidbits for her. You stay away. The second day, if she says it's not convenient here, and insists on taking the work home, we're finished. But if she's willing to come again, we've won point three. You stay away that day, too.

“Around noon the third day, I want you to arrive, neat and clean, and stand outside the door and cough as a signal. Then you call: 'Godmother, why haven't I seen you these days?' I'll come out and invite you into the rear room. If when she sees you she runs home, I won't be able to stop her, and that will be the end of it. If she stays put, then we've won point four.

“You sit down, and I'll say to the pullet: “This is the benefactor who has given me the material. I'm terribly grateful!' I'll praise your many good qualities, and you compliment her on her needlework. If she doesn't respond, it's over. If she replies, that's point five.

“Then I'll say: 'I'm lucky to have this lady do the sewing for me. I'm very grateful to both of you benefactors. One gives money, the other gives skill. This lady wouldn't even be here if I hadn't gone out of my way to beg her. Won't you help me, Right Honorable, to show her my thanks?' You take out some silver and ask me to buy her something. If she turns and leaves, I won't be able to stop her, and that will be the end. If she remains, we've won point six.

“I'll start for the door with the money and say to her: 'Please keep this gentleman company for a while.' If she gets up and goes home, there's nothing I can do about it. That will be the end. If she doesn't leave, we'll still be winning. Point seven will belong to us.

“When I return with the things I've bought and put them on the table, I'll say to her: 'Rest a while and have a cup of wine. We can't refuse this gentleman's treat.' If she won't drink with you at the same table and leaves, that's the finish. If she only says she wants to go, but doesn't, that's fine. Point eight will be ours.

“After she's had plenty to drink and you've started a conversation with her, I'll claim there's no more wine, and tell you to buy some more. You ask me to do it. I'll pretend to go, and close the door, leaving you two alone inside. If she gets upset and runs home, that will be the end. But if, after I close the door, she doesn't make any fuss, we've won point nine. We'll need only one point more for the game.”

“But that's the tough one, Right Honorable. You'll have to speak to her sweetly. Take it easy. If you make any sudden moves and spoil everything, there's nothing more I can do for you. Brush one of the chopsticks off the table with your sleeve. Bend down as if to pick it up and pinch her foot. If she screams, I'll come charging in to the rescue, and you will have lost, probably for good. If she doesn't make a sound, that will be point ten. Then, and then, she will be all yours! How do you like my plan?”

Ximen was delighted. “Maybe it couldn't get into the emperor's Hall of Fame, but it's excellent!”

“Don't forget my ten ounces of silver!”

“'Can one forget Dongting Lake while eating its fragrant tangerine peel?' When do we start?”

“I'll have news for you by tonight. I'm going to sound her out today before Wu the Elder gets back. You buy those silks and send them over.”

“Put this through for me, godmother, and I won't disappoint you!”

Ximen bid farewell to Mistress Wang, went to the market, bought the brocade, silk, gauze and ten ounces of pure silk floss. He had a family servant wrap and deliver them to the tea-shop, together with five pieces of silver.

Mistress Wang received the silks and money and sent the servant back. Leaving her place via the rear door, she went to Wu's house. Golden Lotus invited her upstairs to sit a while.

“Why don't you ever come over to my place for a cup of tea?” the old woman asked.

“I haven't been feeling well these last few days. I just don't have the energy,” the girl replied.

“Do you have an almanac here? I want to pick a good day to hire a tailor.”

“What sort of clothes are you making?”

“I'm getting all kinds of aches and ailments in my old age. If anything should happen, I'd like to have my burial garments ready. Fortunately, a wealthy gentleman, seeing my condition, has given me some fine silks and good floss. I've had them at home for over a year, but I can't get them made up. Lately, I've been feeling that my days are numbered. Because it's leap year I wanted to use this extra month to get them done. But my tailor keeps stalling. Says he's too busy, can't come. It's simply awful!”

Golden Lotus laughed. “Maybe you wouldn't like my work, but I'd be glad to make them for you, if you'll let me.”

The old woman's face was wreathed in smiles. “If you'd apply your precious hands to them, I would be the gainer, even after death! I've heard of your skill with the needle, but I never had the courage to ask you.”

“Why not? I've said I'd do it, and I will. We must get someone to choose a lucky day for you from the almanac, and I'll start.”

“You're my lucky star! As long as you'll do it, we don't need any special day. I recall now I asked someone the other day, and he said tomorrow would be a Most Auspicious Day. I forgot, because you don't really need a Most Auspicious Day to cut materials.”

“How can you say that? You do for burial garments.”

“In that case, fine. Tomorrow's the day. I'll trouble you to come to my humble home.”

“That won't be necessary, godmother, just bring the materials here.”

“But I'd love to see you work. Besides, I have no one to watch the shop.”

“All right, then. I'll come over after breakfast.”

“Mistress Wang thanked Golden Lotus profusely and left. That evening she told Ximen what had transpired, and instructed him to return the day after tomorrow.

Nothing happened that night. Early the next morning Mistress Wang cleaned her house, bought some thread, put on the tea kettle, and waited.

Wu the Elder finished his breakfast, took his carrying-pole and hampers of buns, and went out on the street. Golden Lotus rolled up the front door curtain and proceeded through the back door to the house of Mistress Wang. The old woman greeted her with unrestrained joy. She led the girl into the rear room, poured her a cup of strong tea, spread before her shelled pine nuts and walnuts, and urged her to eat. First wiping the table clean, Mistress

Wang laid out the silks. The girl measured them, cut the appropriate lengths and began to sew.

“What technique,” marvelled the old woman. “In my nearly seventy years I've never seen such fine needlework!”

Golden Lotus continued sewing until noon, when Mistress Wang served her wine and noodles. The girl resumed sewing until it was nearly dark, then gathered the materials together and went home. Wu the Elder was just entering the door with his carrying-pole and empty hampers. The girl opened the door for him and lowered the screen. As he came into the room he noticed that his wife's face was flushed.

“Where have you been drinking?”

“Mistress Wang, next door, asked me to make some burial garments for her. She served me a snack at noon.”

“Aiya! You mustn't eat her food. We may be wanting a favor from her some day. Come home when it's time to eat. Don't trouble her. Take some money with you, if you go again tomorrow, and treat her to wine in return. 'A close neighbor means more than a distant relative.' Don't forget your manners. If she won't let you treat her, take the materials home and work on them here.”

The girl listened. Nothing more was said on the subject that evening.

Mistress Wang's plan for getting Golden Lotus over to her house was set. The next morning after breakfast, Wu the Elder departed, and the old woman promptly called for her. She brought out the materials and, as the girl sewed, served her tea. Of that no more need be said.

When noon approached, Golden Lotus handed Mistress Wang a string of copper coins. “Let's have some wine together, godmother.”

“Aiya! Who ever heard of such a thing? I've asked you here to do some work for me. I can't let you spend any money!”

“My husband said if you insist on being polite, I'm to take the work home and do it for you there.”

“Wu the Elder is too polite,” the old woman said quickly. “Since that's how it is, I suppose I'll have to agree.” The last thing she wanted was to disturb the arrangement.

She added some money of her own to what the girl had given her, bought some top quality wine and food, and fruits out of season, and served them solicitously to Golden Lotus. Good reader, observe: Nine out of ten women, no matter how clever they may be, invariably are taken in by small attentions and flattery.

The girl ate and drank, and sewed a bit longer. When it began to grow dark, showered with the thanks of her hostess, she returned home.

To skip the idle chatter: The moment Mistress Wang saw Wu the Elder leave after breakfast the third morning, she went to his rear door and called: “I'm here to bother you again....”

Golden Lotus came down the stairs. “I was just coming over.”

The two went to the old woman's rear room, sat down, got out the materials, and the girl commenced to sew. Mistress Wang poured tea, which they both drank.

It was nearly noon. Ximen, unable to wait another day, arrived at the door of the tea-shop on Purple Stone Street. He wore a new kerchief on his head, was smartly dressed, and had brought four or five ounces of silver.

He coughed. “Godmother, where have you been these days?”

The old woman glanced out. “Who's that, calling godmother?”

“It's me.”

Mistress Wang hurried into the shop. She smiled. “I had no idea. So it's you, Right Honorable. You're come just at the right time. Please step inside. I want to show you something.” She took him by the sleeve and led him into

the rear room. To the girl she said: “This is the gentleman I told you about. The one who gave me the materials.”

Ximen greeted Golden Lotus respectfully. She quickly put down her work and curtsied.

“I've had the silks you gave me for a year,” Mistress Wang told Ximen, “but I couldn't get them made up. Fortunately, this lady is now doing them for me. Her stitches are as fine as any machine weave! So close and exact! A rare skill! See for yourself, Right Honorable.”

Ximen picked up the unfinished garment and gazed at it admiringly. “Remarkable. A fairy touch!”

The girl smiled. “The gentleman is making fun of me.”

“Godmother,” said Ximen, “may I ask? Whose wife is this lady?”

“Guess.”

“How can I?”

Mistress Wang laughed. “She's married to Wu the Elder, next door. Did that pole hurt your head the other day? You've forgotten.”

Golden Lotus blushed. “It slipped. I hope the gentleman won't hold it against me.”

“Of course not,” exclaimed Ximen.

“The Right Honorable is very amiable,” Mistress Wang interpolated. “He's not the kind to bear a grudge. A very nice man.”

“We hadn't met before the other day,” said Ximen. “So she's Wu the Elder's wife. I know him. A competent manager. He conducts his business on the street and never offends anyone, old or young. He earns money and has a good disposition. An unusual person.”

“That's Wu the Elder,” cried Mistress Wang. “And this lady is the most dutiful of wives.”

“He's a useless fellow,” said Golden Lotus. “You're laughing at us, sir.”

“Not at all, madam,” protested Ximen. “The ancients say: 'The pliant rise in the world, the hard invite disaster.' An excellent man like your Wu the Elder 'doesn't lose a drop in ten thousand tons of water'.”

“How true,” gushed the old woman, beating the drum from the sidelines.

Still uttering compliments, Ximen sat down opposite the girl.

“Do you know who this gentleman is?” asked Mistress Wang.

“No, I don't.”

“He's one of the wealthiest men in the county, a friend of the magistrate. He's called the Right Honorable Ximen. He's very rich. He has a medicinal drug shop opposite the county office. His money would overflow the Big Dipper. Rice rots in his granaries. Whatever of his that is yellow is gold, what's white is silver, what's round is pearls, what glitters is jewels. He has rhinoceros horns and elephant tusks....”

With wild exaggeration, Mistress Wang praised Ximen. The girl listened, her head bent over her sewing. Ximen gazed at her, consumed with desire. He couldn't wait to get her alone. The old woman poured tea and put a cup in front of each of them.

“Have some tea with the gentleman,” she said to Golden Lotus.

There was a touch of provocation in the girl's glances. Mistress Wang looked at Ximen significantly and touched her face with five fingers of her hand. He understood. Five-tenths of the battle was won.

“If you hadn't come, I wouldn't have presumed to call on you and invite you,” Mistress Wang said to him. “But you two were fated to meet, and here, by lucky coincidence. Although 'One person shouldn't impose on two patrons,' as the saying goes, you have spent money, Right Honorable, and

this lady is giving her skill. I hate to bother you any further, but don't you think, since she's kind enough to come here, that you might treat her to a little something, on my behalf?”

“How could I be so slow! Here is some money.” Ximen took out some pieces of silver and handed them wrapped in a kerchief, to Mistress Wang.

“I can't allow you to do that,” said the girl. But she remained seated.

The old woman took the money and went to the door. “Keep Right Honorable company a while,” said Mistress Wang.

“You mustn't go to any trouble, godmother,” said the girl. She didn't budge.

Ximen and Golden Lotus were strongly drawn to each other. He was frankly staring at her. She, glancing at him from under her lashes, thought him a fine figure of a man, and was already more than half willing. But she kept her head down over her work.

Soon Mistress Wang returned with a cooked fat goose, stewed meat and delicate tidbits. She placed everything on platters and set them on the table.

“Put your sewing away,” she said to the girl, “and have a cup of wine.”

“You go ahead, godmother. It's not proper for me to join the gentleman,” said Golden Lotus. But she didn't leave her seat.

“We're doing this to express my thanks, especially to you. How can you say such a thing?” Mistress Wang laid the dishes on the table. The three sat down, and she poured the wine. Ximen raised his cup.

“Drink hearty, madam,” he said to Golden Lotus.

“Thank you, sir,” the girl smiled.

“I know you have a real capacity,” Mistress Wang said to her. “So don't stint on your drinking.”

Ximen picked up his chopsticks. “Godmother, please serve this lady for me.”

The old woman selected choice pieces and placed them on Golden Lotus's plate. She poured three rounds of wine in succession, then went out to heat some more.

“May I ask how old you are?” Ximen said to the girl.

“Twenty-three.”

“Five years younger than me.”

“You're comparing the earth and the sky, sir,” the girl said politely.

Mistress Wang came back into the room. “This lady is remarkably clever,” she gushed. “Not only does she sew beautifully, but she's read all the classics.”

“Where can you find such a girl these days?” said Ximen. “Wu the Elder is certainly fortunate.”

“You mustn't think I'm trying to provoke anything,” said Mistress Wang, “but with all the women in your household, there isn't one who can compare.

“That's quite true. I can't tell you how hard it's been. I guess I was born unlucky. I've never been able to find a really good one.”

“There was nothing wrong with your first wife.”

“You can say that again. If she were still alive, my household wouldn't be in such a state. Those women are just mouths waiting to be fed. They don't look after a thing.”

“How long ago did your wife die, sir?” the girl asked.

“It's sad story. Though she came from a poor family, she was very skilful. She did everything for me. She's been gone three years now. My household

is in a mess. That's why I spend so much time outside. It only aggravates me when I'm home."

"Do you mind if I'm frank?" said Mistress Wang. "Your first wife wasn't as handy with a needle as this lady is."

"She wasn't as good-looking, either."

Mistress Wang laughed. "Why haven't you ever invited me to tea in that house you have on East Street?"

"You mean where I'm keeping Zhang Xixi, the ballad singer? She's just a singsong girl. I don't care for her much."

"You've had Li Jiaojiao for quite a while."

"Yes. I keep her at home. If she were like this lady here, I'd have raised her to the status of wife long ago."

"If you could find such a girl, would you have any trouble bringing her into the family?"

"Both my parents are dead. I'm my own master. Who would dare to object?"

"I'm only joking. The problem is, there isn't any girl who would please you."

"Who says there isn't? It's just that my marriage luck has been bad. I've never met the right one."

Ximen and the old woman talked for a while in this manner, then Mistress Wang said: "I'm afraid the wine is nearly finished. Can I trouble you to buy another bottle?"

"There are five ounces of silver in my purse. You can have them all. Take what you need and keep the change."

Mistress Wang thanked him and got up, glancing at Golden Lotus. The dram of wine inside the girl was stirring her passions. She and the man were talking freely. Both were aroused. Golden Lotus kept her head down, but she didn't leave. Grinning, Mistress Wang addressed her.

“I'm going out to buy another bottle. Please keep Right Honorable company. There's still some wine in the heating tube. You and he can each have a cup. I'm going all the way down to that shop opposite the county office to get some good wine, so I won't be back for quite a while.”

“You needn't go to so much bother,” the girl murmured. She remained where she was.

Mistress Wang went out, close and tied the doors of the rear room, then sat herself down on guard.

Ximen poured wine for Golden Lotus. With his wide sleeve, he swept a pair of chopsticks from the table to the floor. Fate was on the side of his amorous quest—they landed right beside the girl's feet. He bent down as though to pick them up and instead squeezed one of her embroidered satin shoes. Golden Lotus laughed.

“Sir, you mustn't! Are you trying to seduce me?”

Ximen knelt before her. “I want you so!”

Golden Lotus raised him to his feet and threw herself into his arms. There in Mistress Wang's room the two hastily undressed. Sharing the same pillow, they revelled joyously.

After the clouds had spent their rain, and Golden Louts and Ximen were about to put on their clothes. Mistress Wang pushed open the doors and came in. She pretended to be very angry.

“Pretty tricks you two have been up to,” she cried, startling the lovers. “A fine thing! I asked you here to make me garments,” she said to Golden Lotus, “not to play adulterous games! If Wu the Elder finds out, he'll surely blame me! It would be better for me if I told him about it first!”

She started for the door. The girl grabbed her by the skirt. “Godmother, spare me!”

“Not so loud, godmother,” Ximen pleaded.

Mistress Wang chuckled. “I'll spare you both on one condition.”

“One or a dozen,” said Golden Lotus. “I'll promise you anything!”

“From now on, you must fool Wu the Elder and entertain Right Honorable every day without fail, in which case I'll spare you. But if you miss a single day, I'll tell your husband!”

“Whatever you say, godmother.”

“And you, Right Honorable Ximen, you know what I want. The matter is a complete success. Don't forget your promise. If you do, I'll tell Wu the Elder!”

“Never fear, godmother. I won't forget.”

The three drank until afternoon. Golden Lotus rose. “My husband will be home soon. I have to go.”

She returned through the back door and was lowering the front door curtain when Wu arrived.

At that moment Mistress Wang was saying to Ximen: “Well, what do you think of my method?”

“Marvellous! I'm sending you a bar of silver as soon as I get home. You shall have everything I promised!”

“'My eyes watch for the banners of royal reward, my ears are cocked for the sound of glad tidings.' Don't fail me! I don't want to be 'a funeral singer demanding payment after the burial'!”

Ximen laughed and departed. Of that no more need be said.

From then on, Golden Lotus slipped over to Mistress Wang's house every day to meet Ximen. They were as close as lacquer, as thick as glue. As the old saying has it: “News of good behavior never gets past the door, but a scandal is heard of a thousand *li* away.” In less man half a month, all the neighbors knew. Only Wu remained in ignorance.

There was a boy of fifteen or sixteen in the county town whose family name was Qiao. Because he was sired by an army man in Yunzhou Prefecture, he was given the name Yunge. All that was left of his immediate family, besides himself, was his old father. A clever youngster, he earned a living selling fresh fruit in the various taverns outside the county office. Sometimes Ximen gave him a bit of money.

One day, carrying a basket of snowy pears, he wandered along the streets looking for Ximen.

“I know a place where I think you can find him,” a gabby fellow said to the boy.

“Please tell me, uncle. I can earn forty or fifty coppers from him. I need them for my old pa.”

“He's hooked up with the wife of Wu the Elder, the bun seller. He's with her every day in Mistress Wang's tea-shop on Purple Stone Street. You'll probably find him there. You're only a child, so go right in.”

Yunge thanked the man, went with his basket to Purple Stone Street and entered the tea-shop. Mistress Wang was sitting on a little stool, hand-spinning hemp thread. The boy put down his basket and greeted her.

“My respects, godmother.”

“What do you want, Yunge?”

“I'm looking for Right Honorable. I can earn forty or fifty coppers for my old pa.”

“Which Right Honorable?”

“You know which one, godmother. He's the one I mean.”

“Even if he's a Right Honorable, he must have a name.”

“His name has two syllables.”

“What are they?”

“Are you kidding? Right Honorable Ximen. I have to speak to him.”

The boy started for the rear of the shop. Mistress Wang grabbed him. “Where are you going, young jackanapes? There's such a thing as privacy in a person's home.”

“I only want to call him out a minute.”

“Frigging monkeyshines! Who says I have any Right Honorable Ximen in there!”

“Don't hog him all to yourself. Let me have a lick of the juice too. Think I don't know?”

“Little ape! What do you know!”

“Stingy as cutting vegetables with a hoof-paring knife in a wooden spoon, aren't you? Don't want to miss a bit. Well, all I have to do is speak out, and that bun-selling man is liable to lose his temper!”

The old woman realized he was on to her, and she flew into a rage. “You young scamp! How dare you come in here farting and blowing!”

“A young scamp is better than an old bawd any time!”

Mistress Wang seized him and gave him two lumps on the noggin.

“What are you thumping me for?” yelled the boy.

“Thieving ape! If you don't keep your voice down, I'll slap you right out of here!”

“Dirty old whore-monger! Hitting me for no reason at all!”

Mistress Wang held Yunge by the back of the neck with one hand and pounded his skull with the other, while she rushed him through the door. She thew the basket after him, sending the pears rolling all over the street.

The boy was no match for her. Cursing and weeping, he picked up his pears. Angrily, he pointed at her shop. “Just wait, old bawd, I'm going to tell him! You'll see if I don't!” He set out in search, basket on his arm.

Because of what had gone before, all sorts of misfortune followed. As a result, the grass in the dens of foxes and rabbits was disturbed, and loving ducks on the sand were startled from their slumber.

Who was it that the boy was seeking? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 25
Mistress Wang Instigates Ximen Qing
The Adulterous Wife Poisons Wu the Elder

The aggrieved boy, basket in hand, went in search of Wu the Elder. After turning through a couple of streets, he saw the short man coming towards him, carrying his hampers of buns. Yunge halted.

“It's only a few days since I saw you! What have you been eating that's made you so fat?”

Wu rested his load. “I'm still the same. What's fat about me?”

“I tried to buy some bran the other day, but couldn't find any anywhere. Everyone said you had some in your house.”

“I'm not raising geese or ducks. What would I want with bran?”

“How is it then that you're stuffed so fat you don't even steam when you're trussed up by the heels and cooked in the pot?”

“Mocking me, eh, you young scamp! My wife doesn't sleep with other men. Why are you calling me a cuckold duck?”

“She doesn't sleep with other men, she just sleeps with another man!”

Wu clutched the boy. “Who is he?”

Yunge laughed. “All you do is grab me. But would you dare to bite his pecker off?”

“Tell me who he is, little brother, and I'll give you ten hot buns!”

“I don't want your buns. But if you treat me to three cups of wine, I'll talk.”

“If it's drink you want, come with me.” Wu picked up his carrying-pole and led the boy to a small tavern. He rested his load, took out a few buns, and ordered some meat and a dram of wine, all of which was set before Yunge.

“That's enough wine,” said the young rascal, “but I could use a few more slices of meat.”

“Tell me about it, little brother!”

“Keep your shirt on. I will just as soon as I've finished eating. Don't let it get you down. I'm gong to help you to catch him!”

Wu watched the boy polish off the meat and wine. “Now will you tell me?” he pressed.

“Feel these bumps on my head, if you want to know!”

“How did you get them?”

“Today I went looking for Ximen Qing with a basket of snowy pears, to get a little money out of him. I couldn't find him anywhere. Then a fellow on the street said: 'He cozies up with Wu's wife in Mistress Wang's tea-shop. He goes there every day.' I was hoping to earn forty or fifty coppers, but that sow bitch Mistress Wang wouldn't let me go in and see him! She pounded my skull and threw me out! That's why I've come looking for you.

What I said when we met was only to make you mad. Otherwise you wouldn't have asked me about it."

"Can this really be true?"

"There you go again! A real patsy! Those two are having themselves a time. The minute you leave they get together in Mistress Wang's. And you ask whether it's true of false!"

"Frankly, little brother, I have been suspicious lately. She goes over to Mistress Wang's to sew every day, but when she comes back, her face is flushed. So that's what it is! I'll put my pole and hampers away and go over and catch them in the act. How about it?"

"Where are your brains? You couldn't do it alone. That Mistress Wang is a tough old bitch. You'd never get by her. The three of them must have some signal. They'd hide your wife somewhere as soon as you showed up. And that Ximen Qing is a devil. He could take on twenty like you. You wouldn't catch your wife, and he'd give you a beating. He's rich and influential. He'd probably file a complaint as well, and sue you in court. You don't have any strong backing. He'd finish you off!"

"Everything you say is so, little brother. How am I going to get back at them?"

"That old bitch pummeled me. I want to get back at her, too. Now here's what you do: When you go home tonight, don't blow up, act as if you don't know anything, the same as any other day. Tomorrow, make less buns than usual. I'll be waiting for you at the end of Purple Stone Street. If Ximen has gone in there, I'll call to you. You follow me, carrying your hampers, and wait nearby. I'll go and sass the old bitch. She's sure to sail into me. I'll toss my basket out into the street. That's the signal for you to go charging in. I'll butt the old bitch with my head and hold her off. You rush into the back room and start yelling that you've been wronged.... How's that for an idea?"

"All right! We'll do it! But it's going to be hard on you, little brother. Take these strings of cash and buy some rice for yourself. Wait for me tomorrow morning at the entrance to Purple Stone Street."

The boy accepted the money, and several hot buns, and departed. Wu paid the bill, shouldered his carrying-pole and went out to hawk his wares.

Generally, Golden Lotus scolded and chivied her husband in a hundred ways. But she knew she was being unreasonable, and lately she had been treating him somewhat better. When he returned home that evening, he behaved as usual and said nothing out of the ordinary.

“Have you been drinking?” she asked.

“I had a few cups with another pedlar.”

Golden Lotus set the food on the table, and they ate. That night nothing special happened.

The next morning after breakfast Wu prepared only two or three trays of buns to put in his hampers. All the girl's thoughts were of Ximen, and she paid no attention to what her husband was doing. Wu shouldered his carrying-pole and set out. No sooner had he gone than Golden Lotus hurried over to Mistress Wang's to wait for Ximen.

When Wu arrived at the entry to Purple Stone Street, he found Yunge already there with his basket.

“What's happening?” Wu asked.

“It's early yet,” said the boy. “You sell some buns for a while. He's almost sure to come. Don't go too far away.”

Wu was off and back like a whirling cloud.

“Watch for my basket,” the boy reminded him. “When I fling it out, you rush in.”

Wu stored his pole and hampers in a safe place. Of that we'll say no more.

We'll talk rather of Yunge, and how, with his basket, he entered the tea-shop.

“Old bitch,” he cried. “What right did you have to hit me yesterday?”

Mistress Wang's temper had not improved. She jumped to her feet and shouted: “There's nothing between us, young ape! How dare you come cursing me again?”

“You're a bawd, I say, and a whore-mongering old bitch. So what!”

In a fury, Mistress Wang grabbed Yunge and pummeled him.

“Hit me, will you!” yelled the boy. He threw his basket out into the street. Seizing her around the waist, he butted her in the belly. She staggered backwards until brought up short against the wall, the young scamp's head still rammed into her mid-section.

Wu, raising the front of his gown, strode quickly into the tea-shop. Mistress Wang tried frantically to stop him, but the boy held her firmly pinned to the wall.

“Wu the Elder is here!” She loudly exclaimed.

Golden Lotus, in the rear room, became frantic. She ran over and leaned hard against the door. Ximen dived under the bed. Master Wu tried to push the door open, but couldn't budge it.

“Fine goings-on!” he shouted.

The girl, distraught, stood pressing against the door. “You're always shooting off your mouth what a great fighter you are, but in an emergency, you're useless!” she spat at Ximen. “A paper tiger scares you silly!”

This was a plain hint for Ximen to strike Wu down and escape. The recumbent gentleman under the bed, stimulated by these words, crawled out. He pulled open the door and cried: “Don't fight!”

Wu tried to grab him, but Ximen lashed out with his right foot and caught the short man square in the center of the chest, knocking him flat on his back. Ximen then fled. Yunge, seeing that things had gone wrong, pushed

the old woman aside and also ran. The neighbors knew what a tough customer Ximen was. They dared not intervene.

Mistress Wang raised up Wu the Elder. Blood was flowing from his mouth, his skin was a waxy yellow. She called Golden Lotus. The wife emerged from the rear room, scooped a bowlful water and brought him round. She and Mistress Wang, supporting Wu under the arms, helped him through the back door and up the stairs of his house, where they put him to bed. Nothing further happened that night.

The next day Ximen inquired and learned there were no repercussions, so he met Golden Lotus as usual. They hoped her husband would die. Wu was ill for five days and couldn't leave his bed. When he wanted soup or water she wouldn't give it to him. When he called her she didn't answer. Each day she made herself up alluringly and went out, returning always with a rosy face. Wu several times nearly fainted from sheer rage, but she paid him no heed.

He called her to him and said: “I know what you're up to. I caught the two of you together. You got your lover to kick me in the chest, and I'm more dead than alive, yet you two are still going on with your games! I may die —I'm no match for you. But don't forget my brother Wu Song! You know what he's like! Sooner or later he's coming back. Do you think he's going to let you get away with it? Have pity on me. Help me recover quickly, and when he come home I won't say anything. If you don't treat me right, he'll have something to say to the both of you!”

Golden Lotus did not reply, but went next door and told Mistress Wang and Ximen what her husband had said. Ximen felt his blood run cold. He groaned.

“Constable Wu is the man who killed the tiger on Jingyang Ridge. He was the boldest fighter in Qinghe County! We've been having this affair for some time now, and we've been marvellous together in body and in mind. I forgot all about your husband's brother! What are we going to do? This is a terrible situation!”

Mistress Wang laughed coldly. “I've never seen the like. You're the helmsman and I'm only a passenger, but I'm not worried and you're in a flap!”

“Though it shames me to say it, I don't know how to deal with this sort of thing. Have you any idea how to cover for us?”

“Do you want to be long-term lover, or short?”

“What do you mean?”

“If you're satisfied with being short-term lovers, separate after today and when Wu recovers, apologize to him. Nothing will be said when Wu Song comes home. When he's sent out on another mission, you can get together again. If you want to be long-term lovers, and not have to be frightened and alarmed every day, I have a clever scheme. Of course, you may not be able to do it.”

“Save us, godmother! We want to be long-term lovers!”

“The thing we need for this scheme other households don't have. But yours, thank Heaven, does.”

“If you ask for my eyes, I'll gouge them out! What is this thing?”

“The wretch is very ill. Take advantage of his misery to do him in. Get some arsenic from your drug shop, let this lady buy medicine for heart pains, mix the two together and finish the dwarf off. She can have him cremated, so there won't be any traces. When Wu Song comes back, what will he be able to do? You know the old sayings: 'Brother and sister-in-law must keep their distance.' 'Parents pick the first husband, widows choose the second.' A brother-in-law can't interfere. You continue to meet secretly for half a year or so till the mourning period is over, then marry her. You'll be long-term lovers, and merry till the end of your days. What do you think of my plan?”

“It's a frightening crime, godmother! Never mind. We'll do it! All or nothing!”

“Good. Pull it out by the roots and it won't grow again. Leave any roots and it sprouts once more, come spring. Get the arsenic, Right Honorable. I'll tell the lady how to use it. When it's over, you'll have to reward me well.”

“Naturally! That goes without saying!”

Not long after, Ximen arrived with the arsenic and gave it to Mistress Wang. The old woman looked at Golden Lotus.

“I'll teach you how to mix this in the medicine. Didn't Wu ask you to treat him better? Soften him up with a little kindness. He'll ask you to buy some medicine for his heart. Put this arsenic in it. When he wakes up at night, pour the mixture down his throat, then get out of the way. Once it starts working in him, it will split his guts, and he'll shout and scream. Muffle his cries with a quilt. Don't let anyone hear. Have a pot of hot water boiling, and soak a rag. He'll bleed from every opening, he'll bite his lips. When he dies, remove the quilt and clean away all the blood with the rag. Then into the coffin, off to the cremation, and not a friggin thing will happen!”

“It sounds all right,” said Golden Lotus. “Only I'm afraid I'll go soft! I won't be able to handle the corpse!”

“That's easy. Just knock on the wall, and I'll come up and help you.”

“Do the job carefully you two,” said Ximen. “I'll be back at dawn tomorrow to hear your report.” He stood up and departed.

Mistress Wang crushed the arsenic granules with her fingers into powder and gave it to Golden Lotus to hide.

The girl crossed over to her own house and went upstairs. Wu was barely breathing. He seemed to be at death's door. She sat down on the edge of the bed and pretended to weep.

“Why are you crying?” asked Wu.

Golden Lotus dabbed at her eyes. “I made a mistake and let that scoundrel beguile me. I never thought he'd kick you! I've heard about a very good

medicine. I'd like to buy it for you, but I'm afraid you don't trust me, so I haven't dared!”

“Save my life and we'll forget about the whole thing. I won't hold it against you, and I'll say nothing to Wu Song. Go buy the medicine quickly! Save me!”

The girl took some coppers, hurried to Mistress Wang's house and sent her out for the medicinal powders. Then she brought the packet upstairs and showed it to Wu.

“This is heart balm,” she said. “The doctor in the drug shop says you should take it in the middle of the night and cover your head with two quilts to make you perspire. Tomorrow, you'll be able to get up.”

“That's fine! I know it's a lot of trouble, but stay awake till midnight and give me the potion.”

“Don't worry about a thing. Just sleep. I'll look after you.”

The day drew to a close and darkness gathered. Golden Lotus lit a lamp. Then she went down to the kitchen, set a pot of water on the stove and put a rag in to boil. When she heard the watchman's drum thump three times, she spilled the arsenic powder into a cup, filled a bowl with hot water, and took them both up the stairs. She called to her husband.

“Where did you put the medicine?”

“Here under the sleeping mat, beside my pillow. Mix it quickly and give it to me.”

Golden Louts took the packet of medicinal powders, sprinkled them into the cup so that they covered the arsenic, then added hot water and stirred with a silver pin which she drew from her hair. Raising Wu with her left hand, she held the cup to his lips with her right.

“It's very bitter,” he said after the first sip.

“As long as it cures you, what do you care how bitter it is.”

He opened his mouth for another sip, and the girl tilted the cup and forced its entire contents down his throat. She let him fall back on his pillow and swiftly got off the bed.

Wu gasped. “My stomach hurts! The pain, the pain! I can't stand it!”

The girl grabbed two quilts from the foot of the bed and flung them over his face.

“I can't breathe!” he cried.

“The doctor says I should make you sweat! You'll get well quicker!”

Before Wu could reply, the girl, afraid he would struggle, leaped onto the bed and knelt astride his body, pressing down on the sides of the quilts with both hands. He gasped, panted till his intestines split asunder. Then he breathed his last and lay still.

Golden Lotus pulled back the quilts. Wu had lacerated his lips with his teeth, he had bled from every orifice. Frightened, the girl jumped down from the bed and rapped on the wall. Mistress Wang heard the signal, came to the back door and coughed. Golden Lotus went downstairs and opened the door.

“Is it done?” asked the old woman.

“It's done all right, but I'm absolutely limp. I can't go on!”

“There's nothing to it. I'll help you.”

Mistress Wang rolled up her sleeves, filled a bucket with hot water, put the rag in, and carried them upstairs. Rolling back the quilts, she wiped around Wu's mouth, cleaned up the blood that had spewed from his seven openings, and covered him with his clothes. Slowly, the two women toted him down the stairs. They found an old door and laid him out on it. They combed his hair, tied a kerchief round his head, put on his clothes, shoes and stockings, spread a piece of fine white silk over his face, and covered his body with a

clean quilt. Then they went up stairs and set the bedroom in order, and Mistress Wang returned home.

Golden Lotus commenced falsely bewailing the departure of her family supporter. Reader please note, women's lamentations are of three kinds the world over: With both tears and sound it is called crying, with tears and without sound it is called weeping, without tears and with sound it is called wailing. Golden Lotus wailed. By then it was the fifth watch.

The sky was not yet light when Ximen came to hear the news. Mistress Wang related it in detail. Ximen gave her money to buy a coffin and other funerary equipment. He told her to call the girl. Golden Lotus crossed over to Mistress Wang's.

“Wu the Elder is dead,” she said. “You're my sole support from now on.”

“That goes without saying.”

“There's only one more difficulty,” said Mistress Wang. “Ho, the local coroner, is a clever man. I'm afraid he may notice something, and not agree to the encoffining.”

“Don't worry about that,” said Ximen. “I'll have a few words with him. He wouldn't dare go against me.”

“You do that, then,” said the old woman. “Don't delay.”

Ximen promptly left.

By the time the sun was well risen Mistress Wang had bought the coffin, candles and paper ingots, and returned home and cooked some soup and rice for Golden Lotus. They lit a mourning lamp and placed it beside the body. Neighbors came to offer their condolences. The girl covered her powdered face and pretended to weep.

“What illness did Wu the Elder die of?” queried the neighbors.

“He had pains in his heart! They got worse every day! It was hopeless! And last night, at the third watch, be left me!” Golden Lotus sobbed loudly.

The neighbors knew there was something peculiar about his death, but they were afraid to probe too deeply. They gave only the usual advice: “The dead are gone, but the living must carry on. Don't take it so hard.”

Hypocritically, the girl thanked them, and the neighbors left.

When the coffin was delivered, Mistress Wang sent for Coroner Ho.

All the funerary equipment had been purchased, as well as everything that was needed in the house. Two monks were hired to keep vigil later on. Ho dispatched a few of his men to get things ready.

At mid-morning Ho set out slowly for his destination. When he reached the entry to Purple Stone Street he was hailed by Ximen Qing.

“Where to?”

“I'm on my way to inspect the body of Wu the Elder, the bun seller.”

“Can you spare a minute for a chat?”

Ho went with Ximen to a small tavern in a side street, and entered a booth.

“Please sit at the head of the table,” said Ximen.

“How can a man of my rank presume to sit together with your Honor?”

“You mustn't treat me like a stranger. Please be seated.”

The two sat down and Ximen called for a bottle of good wine. The waiter laid out fruit and vegetables to go with the wine and poured the drinks. Ho was curious. “He never drank with me before,” he thought. “There's more here than meets the eye....”

They drank for an hour or so and Ximen took a ten-ounce bar of silver from his sleeve and placed it on the table. “Please don't scorn this as too trivial. There will be more later on.”

“I've done nothing at all,” Ho protested, with courteously clasped hands. “How can I accept Right Honorable's silver? Even if there is some way I can be of service, I still wouldn't want it.”

“No need to stand on ceremony. Please take it, and I'll tell you.”

“Tell me, by all means. I'd like to hear.”

“Well, it's this. Soon you'll be going to the house of the deceased, and there also they'll give you some money. When you examine the body of Wu the Elder, I want you to do everything just right. Let an embroidered quilt cover all. That's all I have to say.”

“But of course. Why not? How can I take money for a little thing like that?”

“If you don't take the silver it means you're refusing me.”

He knew that Ximen was a rascal who had influence with the officials, and he was afraid of him. He had no choice but to accept. They drank several more cups. Ximen told the waiter to charge it to his account, and come tomorrow to his shop for payment. The two walked down the stairs and left the tavern.

“Don't forget,” said Ximen. “And keep this quiet. I'll reward you further.” He walked away.

Ho's suspicions were aroused. “This is very odd,” he mused. “Why should he give me so much money before I inspect the body of Wu the Elder? There must be something fishy!”

At the door of the house he found his men waiting. “What was the cause of death?” he asked.

“Pains in the heart, his wife says,” the men replied.

He raised the door curtain and entered. Mistress Wang greeted him.

“We've been waiting for you.”

“A small matter delayed me.”

Golden Lotus, wearing plain drab garments, came from the inner room, feigning tears.

“Calm yourself,” Ho urged. “What a pity that Wu the Elder had to return to Heaven.”

The girl dabbed her eyes. “You don't know the half of it! Who would have thought that he'd die only a few days after his heart started to pain him! I'm so miserable!”

Ho looked her over. “I've heard about Wu's wife, but I've never seen her,” he said to himself. “So this is the kind of woman he had! There's reason behind those ten ounces of silver of Ximen!”

Ho walked over to the body, opened the shroud, and raised the silk covering Wu's face. The corner had eyes like a hawk, and what he saw caused him to fall over backwards, blood spurting from his mouth. His nails turned blue, his lips purple, his skin yellow, his eyes lackluster.

Truly, his body was like the waning moon being devoured by the mountains at the fifth watch, his life flickered like a dying lamp at midnight.

Did Ho the coroner live or die? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 26
Coroner Ho Steals Bones form the Funeral Pyre
Wu Song Offers Heads as Memorial Sacrifices

When Coroner Ho fell to the ground, his assistants hurried to raise him.

“He's been possessed by an evil spirit,” Mistress Wang asserted. “Bring water, quick!” She sprayed two mouthfuls in his face. He stirred, and gradually revived somewhat. “Take him home,” she directed. “They can decide what to do.”

Using an old door as an improvised stretcher, two assistants carried Coroner Ho back to his house. His family received him and put him to bed. His wife

burst into tears.

“All smiles he was when he left! To come home like this! Who knew he'd be taken by an evil spirit!” She sat on the edge of his bed and wept.

Ho saw that his assistants had gone and that he and his wife were alone. He nudged her with his foot.

“I'm all right,” he said softly. “Don't worry. On my way to inspect Wu's body for encoffining, at the entrance to his street I met Ximen Qing who has a medicinal drug shop in front of the county office. He treated me to wine and gave me ten ounces of silver, saying: 'Put a cover over everything when you inspect the corpse.' I went to Wu's place. I could see that his wife was not a good person, and I became suspicious. I opened the shroud. Wu's face was purple. There was blood in his ears, eyes, nose and mouth. He had bitten his lips. Obviously, he had been poisoned. I was going to announce this, but then I thought —he has nobody to stand up for him; if I offend Ximen Qing I'll only be stirring a hornets' nest. I was going to let it go and approve the encoffining. But then I remembered that Wu has a brother—Constable Wu who beat a tiger to death on Jingyang Ridge. He's the sort who could kill a man without batting an eye. Sooner or later he's coming home, and then this whole thing is going to blow up!”

“Just the other day I heard someone say: 'Yunge, the son of Old Qiao in the rear lane, went with Wu the Elder to Purple Stone Street to nab adulterers. There was a terrific row in the tea-shop!'“ mused Ho's wife. “So that's what it was! You go on with your investigation. What's so hard about that? Get your assistants to approve the encoffining, and find out when the funeral will be. If they keep the body at home till Wu Song returns and then bury it, there won't be any complications. If they bury it now, let them, for the time being. But if they're going to cremate it, something surely is wrong. You attend the ceremony, and take a couple of bones from the pyre when no one is looking. These, plus the ten ounces of silver, will be important proof. If Wu Song doesn't ask any questions when he comes home, you say nothing. You won't be scraping any skin off Ximen Qing's nose, and we'll dine well on his money.”

“You're a good wife and a very clever one!”

Ho got up and instructed his assistants. “I've been taken ill and can't go to Wu's place. You see to the encoffining. Find out when the funeral is to be and let me know immediately. Whatever money they give you, divide fairly among yourselves. If they offer you anything for me, don't accept.”

The assistants presided over Wu being placed in his coffin. When the casket and memorial tablet were set properly in position, they returned and reported to Ho. “His widow says they're going to cremate him three days from now outside the city.” They divided the tip among themselves and left.

“It's just as you predicted,” Ho confided to his wife. “I must go and get those bones!”

At the urging of Mistress Wang, Golden Lotus kept vigil by the coffin all night. The following day, four monks were hired to chant prayers. On the third morning the coroner's assistants arrived to serve as pall-bearers. Several of the neighbors accompanied the funeral cortege. The widow, dressed in mourning, wept the loss of the family bread-winner all the way to the cremation grounds in the outskirts of the city. She directed the attendants to light the funeral pyre. Coroner Ho made his appearance with a string of paper gold ingots. Mistress Wang and Golden Lotus greeted him.

“How fortunate that you've recovered!”

“I owe Wu the Elder for a tray of buns he sold me several days ago. I thought I'd give him this for his journey.”

“What an honest man,” said Mistress Wang.

Ho ignited the paper sacrificial money and helped burn the coffin.

“You're very kind,” said the two women. “When we get home we'll show our thanks more adequately.”

“I'm only trying to make myself useful,” said Ho. “You ladies needn't bother. Why not look after the neighbors waiting in the rest hall? I'll attend to things here.”

At his persuasion, the two women left the pyre. He poked among the ashes, picked out two pieces of bone and doused them in the pool specially used for that purpose. They were flaky and black. He concealed them on his person, then joined the gathering in the rest hall. Soon the coffin was completely consumed. The flames were extinguished, the bones removed and cooled in the pool. The neighbors departed and Ho returned home with the samples he had taken.

On a sheet of paper he wrote the date and the names of those who had attended the cremation. He wrapped the paper around the silver bar, and put them both in a cloth sack which he hid in his house.

When Golden Lotus got home, she set the memorial tablet before the partition wall on the ground floor. It read “In Memory of Wu the Elder, My Departed Husband.” Before the tablet she lit a glass lamp. Inside the room she hung scripture pennants, sacrificial paper money and ingots, and funereal ribbons.

But upstairs every day she sported with Ximen. This was much better than their furtive meetings in Mistress Wang's house, for no one could see them, and they could spend the whole night together whenever they wished.

There wasn't a single neighbor on all of Purple Stone Street who didn't know about it. But they were afraid of the knavish violent Ximen, and no one dared interfere.

“Ecstasy begets tragedy, from misery good fortune springs.” Time quickly passed. More than forty days elapsed. Wu Song carried out the assignment given him by the county magistrate and escorted the cart to the relative's home in the Eastern Capital and delivered the letter and the crates. He spent a few days looking around the busy streets while awaiting the written reply, then returned to Yanggu with his men. The whole mission had taken exactly two months.

It was the end of winter when Wu Song had departed. When he returned it was the start of the third lunar month. He had felt uneasy in his mind all the

time he was away, and he was anxious to see his brother. But first he delivered the reply to the magistrate.

The official was very pleased. After reading the letter, which said that the valuables had been delivered safely, he rewarded Wu Song with a large silver ingot, and wined and dined him. That goes without saying.

Wu Song went to his quarters, changed his clothes, shoes and stockings, put on a fresh head kerchief, locked his door, and hurried to Purple Stone Street. Alarmed neighbors on both sides of the thoroughfare broke into a sweat. They said in an undertone: “Here comes trouble! This big stalwart won't just let the matter rest! Something bad is bound to happen!”

Wu Song raised the door curtain and entered. The first thing he saw was the tablet with the inscription: “In Memory of Wu the Elder, My Departed Husband.” Shocked, he stared.

“Can I believe my eyes?” he thought. “Sister-in-law,” he called, “I'm back. It's me, Wu Song.”

Ximen was frolicking with Golden Lotus upstairs. At the sound of Wu Song's voice he farted with terror and pissed in his pants. He scooted out of the back door and left via Mistress Wang's shop.

“Please have a seat,” the girl called. “I'll be right with you.” She hadn't worn mourning after poisoning her husband, but had adorned and beautified herself every day and reveled with her lover.

She hastily washed off her make-up, removed her hair ornaments, pinned her wanton locks into a severe bun in the back, and quickly exchanged her red skirt and figured tunic for drab mourning garments. Then, sobbing, she descended the stairs.

“Sister-in-law, don't cry,” said Wu Song. “When did my brother die? What was wrong with him? What medicines did he take?”

Weeping, Golden Lotus replied: “About twenty days after you left, he had severe pains in the heart. He was ill for eight or nine days. I prayed, I gave

him every kind of medicine, but nothing could cure him and he died! Now I'm miserable and alone!”

Mistress Wang could hear them through the wall. She was afraid Golden Lotus would make a slip, and she came over to help her.

“My brother never had that ailment before,” said Wu Song. “How could his heart have killed him?”

“Now, Constable,” interjected Mistress Wang, “don't you know the saying: 'The winds and clouds in the sky are unfathomable. A man's luck changes in an instant'? Who can guarantee against misfortune?”

“If it weren't for godmother, here, I would have been helpless,” the girl added. “She was the only one of the neighbors who came to my aid.”

“Where is he buried?” asked Wu Song.

“I was all alone. How could I go looking for a suitable burial place? There was no other way to do it. After three days, I had him cremated.”

“What was the date of his death?”

“In two more days it will be the end of the Seven Times Seven period.”

Wu Song was silent for several minutes. Then he left and returned to his quarters. He unlocked the door, went in, and changed into clean sober garments. He had a soldier make a hempen rope which he tied around his waist and concealed on his person a thick-backed and sharp-edged knife. He took some silver and went out, instructing the soldier to lock the door behind them. In the shops in front of the county office he bought rice and flour and spices, as well as candles and paper replicas of gold and silver ingots. In the evening he went to his brother's house and knocked on the door.

Golden Lotus opened it. Wu Song told the soldier to prepare the sacrificial dishes. He lit the lamp before the memorial tablet and laid out wine and

tidbits. By the second watch, all was in readiness. Wu Song dropped to his knees and kowtowed.

“Brother, your soul is near! In life you were weak and timid, and the cause of your death is not clear. If you were abused and murdered, come to me in a dream, and I will avenge you!”

He sprinkled wine on the ground, burned the paper money replicas and cried so heart-brokenly that all the neighbors were moved. Inside, the girl also pretended to weep. Finally, Wu Song gave the sacrificial wine and food to the soldier to drink and eat. He got two mats and ordered the soldier to sleep by the door between the inner and outer rooms. He himself bedded down before the memorial tablet. Golden Lotus went upstairs, bolted the door at the head of the stairs, and retired.

Wu Song tossed and turned, unable to sleep. It was nearly the third watch. He looked over at the soldier. The fellow was snoring away, motionless as the dead. Wu Song sat up and gazed at the dim glass lamp in front of the tablet. He heard three beats of the watchman's drum and three stick taps. Wu Song sighed.

“My brother was a soft mark all his life,” he said to himself. “I still don't know how he died.”

Before the words were out of his mouth, an icy vapor twisted out from under the altar table, and swirled through the dimness. The lamp before the altar suddenly went out. The paper money on the wall danced wildly.

Wu Song's hair stood on end. He stared. A figure had emerged from beneath the altar table.

“Brother,” it said, “I died a cruel death!”

Wu Song couldn't hear clearly. He moved forward. But the cold vapor had vanished, and the figure was gone. Wu Song fell back in a sitting position on his mat. Was it all a dream? He turned and looked at the soldier. The man was fast asleep.

“There must be something wrong about brother's death!” he thought. “He came to tell me, but my living essence scattered his shade....”

Wu Song decided to say nothing now, and wait for morning.

Gradually the sky lightened. The soldier got up and heated some water, and Wu Song rinsed his mouth and washed. Golden Lotus came down the stairs.

“Brother-in-law, you were restless last night.”

“Sister-in-law, what, exactly, did my brother die of?”

“How can you have forgotten? I told you yesterday evening. His heart pains killed him.”

“Who prescribed the medicines?”

“I have the prescription here.”

“Who bought the coffin?”

“I asked Mistress Wang, next door, to do it.”

“Who were the pall-bearers?”

“Men from Coroner Ho. He took care of everything.”

“I see. I have to go down to the county office and check in for roll-call.”

Wu Song departed with his soldier orderly. When they reached the end of Purple Stone Street he asked: “Do you know Coroner Ho?”

“Don't you remember, Constable? He came to congratulate you when you received your appointment. He lives in a lane off Lion Street.”

“Take me there.”

The soldier escorted him to Ho's door. “You can go now,” said Wu Song. The orderly left. Wu Song raised the door curtain.

“Is Coroner Ho home?” he called.

Ho had just got up. When he heard that it was Wu Song he trembled hand and foot. He couldn't even put his head kerchief on. Hastily he took out the silver and the bones and concealed them on his person. Then he came out and greeted his visitor.

“When did you get back, Constable?”

“I returned yesterday. I'd like a few words with you. Please come with me.”

“Certainly. But first let me give you some tea.”

“That's not necessary. I don't want any.”

The two went to a tavern down the street and sat down. Wu Song ordered two drams of wine. Ho rose politely to his feet.

“I haven't yet given you a welcome-home feast. You really shouldn't be so courteous to me.”

“Be seated,” said Wu Song shortly.

Ho could guess what was on his mind. The waiter poured the wine. Wu Song drank in silence. Ho broke into a sweat. He tried to make conversation, but Wu Song did not respond.

They consumed several cups. Suddenly, from inside his clothes, Wu Song whipped out the sharp knife and stabbed it into the top of the wooden table. The waiter watched, bug-eyed. Of course no one dared come near. He turned a greenish yellow. He was afraid to breathe.

Wu Song rolled up his sleeves and grasped the hilt of the knife.

“I'm a crude fellow. I know only that 'The culprit must pay for his wrong, the debtor for his debt.' You needn't be frightened. Just tell me the truth. I want to know exactly how my brother died. You won't be affected in any way. If I hurt you, I'm no true man! But tell me so much as half a lie and

this knife will let daylight into you in four hundred places! Now, start. What was the condition of my brother's body when you saw it?”

Hands on his knees, Wu Song fixed Ho with a burning stare.

The coroner drew a bag from his sleeve and placed it on the table.

“Calm yourself, Constable. Important evidence is here in this bag!”

Wu Song opened it and looked at the blackened bones and the ten-ounce bar or silver. “Why is this important?”

“I don't know what happened before or after, but on the twenty-second of the first lunar month, Mistress Wang who keeps the tea-shop came to my home to ask me to inspect the body of Wu the Elder for encoffining. On my way I was met at the entrance to Purple Stone Street by Ximen Qing who runs the medicinal drug shop in front of the county office. He insisted that I go with him to a tavern and join him in a bottle of wine. There, he gave me this bar of silver and said: 'Put a cover over everything when inspecting the body.' I knew the fellow was a knave, but he wouldn't let me refuse. I drank the wine, took the silver, and went to Wu the Elder's house. When I raised the shroud I saw dried blood in your brother's nose and ears, and gnawed lacerated lips—all signs of poisoning. I wanted to speak out, but there was no one here to take his part, and his wife had announced that he died of heart pains. So I said nothing, but bit my tongue till it bled and pretended I had been taken by an evil spirit. I was carried home.

“I told my assistants to approve the encoffining, but not to accept a penny on my behalf. On the third day, the body was carried off for cremation. I bought some paper money and followed to pay my respects. I managed to get Mistress Wang and your sister-in-law away from the pyre and secretly took these two pieces of bone and brought them home. They're black and flaky—proof of death by poisoning. On this sheet of paper is the date of the cremation and the names of those who attended. That's my story. You're welcome to check it.”

“Who is the adulterer?”

“I don't know. But I've heard that a boy called Yunge, who sells pears, went to the tea-shop with Wu the Elder to catch them. Everyone on this street has heard about it. If you want the details, ask Yunge.”

“Right. Since there is such a person, let's go together.”

Wu Song sheathed his knife, paid the bill and went with Ho to Yunge's house. At the front door they saw the boy returning with a willow basket on his arm. He had been out buying rice.

“Do you know who this constable is?” Ho asked him.

“Since the day he killed the tiger! What do you two want with me?” Actually, the lad had already guessed, and he added: “There's only one thing. My father is in his sixties and has no one but me. I can't go playing around with you in a court case.”

“Here, little brother,” Wu Song handed him five ounces of silver. “Give these to your father, then come with me for a chat.”

“This will cover the old man's expenses for four or five months,” thought Yunge. “It won't matter if I get tied up in court.”

He took the money and rice in to his father and accompanied his callers to a restaurant on another street. They went upstairs. Wu Song ordered food for three and turned to Yunge.

“Although you're still very young, little brother, you're a filial son who supports his family. That silver I gave you is only for expenses. I need your co-operation. When this affair is finished I'll give you another fourteen or fifteen ounces and you'll be able to set up in business. Now tell me in detail: How did you and my brother go about catching the adulterers in the tea-shop?”

“I'll tell you, but you mustn't rage. On the thirteenth of the first lunar month I went looking for Ximen Qing with a basket of snowy pears to earn a bit of change from him. I couldn't find him anywhere. When I asked, I was told: 'He's in Mistress Wang's tea-shop on Purple Stone Street with the wife of

Wu the Elder, the bun seller. They're hooked up together. He's there every day.' I went directly to the tea-shop, but that old bitch wouldn't let me set foot in the back room! When I said I knew her secret, she pounded me on the noggin, hustled me out, and threw my basket of pears into the street! I was furious! I went to your brother and told him all about it. He wanted to go and nab them right away. I said: 'That's not practical. Ximen Qing is a tough man with his punches and kicks. If you don't catch them in the act, he'll sue you and you'll be in trouble. I'll meet you at the entrance to the street tomorrow. Don't make too many buns! When I see Ximen enter the tea-shop, I'll go in first. You put your things away and wait. As soon as I toss out my basket, you rush in and nab the adulterers!'

“The next day I went to the tea-shop with a basket of pears and cursed the old bitch. She pitched into me. I flung out my basket, butted her with my head and pinned her against the wall. She couldn't stop your brother when he came charging in because I was holding her, but she yelled: 'Wu the Elder is here!' The two inside closed the door. While Wu was shouting, Ximen suddenly pulled the door open, rushed out, and kicked him to the floor. I saw the wife come out. She tried to raise Wu up, but couldn't. I got out of there, fast! About a week later, I heard that he was dead. I don't know how he died.”

“You're telling the truth? You'd better not lie to me!”

“I'd say the same thing in court!”

“That's it, then, little brother.”

The three ate, Wu Song paid, and they went down into the street.

“I must be going,” said Ho.

“Stay with me,” said Wu Song. “I need you two as witnesses.”

They accompanied him to the county office, where the magistrate was holding court.

“Do you have a complaint, Constable?” the official asked when he saw Wu Song.

“My brother Wu the Elder was poisoned and murdered by his wife and Ximen Qing, who were cohabiting in adultery. These two men are witnesses. I request Your Honor to do justice.”

The magistrate questioned Ho and Yunge, then discussed the case in private with several county clerks and functionaries. All of these gentlemen, to say nothing of the magistrate himself, were tied up with Ximen. And so they reached a common accord—Don't touch it.

Returning to the courtroom, the magistrate said to Wu Song: “You're a constable in this county. You ought to know the law. Since ancient times the rule of proof has been: 'For adultery catch the pair, for robbery find the loot, for murder produce the body.' Your brother's body is no more, and you didn't catch them in the act. Just the testimony of these two isn't enough to prove murder. You haven't got a case. Don't act rashly. Think it over. We can only do what's appropriate.”

From inside his robe, Wu Song brought out the two blackened pieces of bone, the ten-ounce silver bar and the sheet of paper. “Surely Your Honor will see that these are no fabrications.”

The magistrate looked at them. “You may rise. I must confer about this. You will be notified. If proper, we'll bring them in for questioning.”

Ho and Yunge went with Wu Song to his quarters. Ximen was informed the same day of what was brewing. He quickly sent a crony to dispense silver among various county officials and functionaries.

The next morning Wu Song again appeared before the magistrate and urged him to take action. But the official was greedy for bribes. He returned the bones and the silver and said: “Wu Song, you shouldn't let people provoke you against Ximen Qing. The case isn't at all clear. It's difficult to deal with. As the sages said: 'Even what you see with your own eyes may not be true. How can you believe what is said behind people's backs?' You mustn't be so rash.”

Also present was the warden of the prison. “Constable,” he said, “in murder cases you need five factors: the body, the wound, the ailment, the instrument, and evidence of presence of the accused. Only then can you investigate.”

“Since Your Honor won't accept my complaint,” Wu Song said to the magistrate, “I shall have to think of something else.”

He gave the silver and the bones to Ho and asked him to keep them for him again. Then he returned to his quarters with the coroner and the boy, and instructed his orderly to feed them.

“Wait here for me,” he requested. “I'll be back soon.”

Carrying ink and a brush-pen, he left the county office compound with three soldiers, and bought four or five sheets of paper, which he concealed on his person. He ordered two of the soldiers to buy a pig's head, a goose, a chicken, two casks of wine and some fruit, and bring them to his brother's house.

At mid-morning he also arrived with the third soldier. Golden Lotus knew by then that he had failed in his accusation, and no longer feared him. Boldly, she waited to see what he would do.

“Come down, sister-in-law,” he called. “I have something to say.”

The girl leisurely descended the stairs. “What is it?”

“Tomorrow is the last day of the Seven Times Seven mourning period for my brother. The neighbors have gone to a lot of trouble for you. I have bought some wine to thank them on your behalf.”

“What do you want to thank them for?” Golden Lotus demanded nastily.

“Manners must be observed,” said Wu Song.

On his instructions, the soldiers lit two large candles and placed them, brightly gleaming, before the altar table. They also lit incense in a burner, hung strings of paper money replicas, piled sacrificial dishes before the

spirit tablet, and laid out the wine and edibles for the guests. Wu Song retained one soldier to heat the wine, told two others to arrange a table and some benches in the outer room and then stand guard at the house doors, front and back.

“Sister-in-law,” he said, “entertain the guests. I'll invite them in.” He went first to Mistress Wang, next door.

“You shouldn't trouble,” she said. “There's nothing to thank me for.”

“We have good reason. We've caused you a lot of inconvenience. It's only a snack and a little wine. You can't refuse.”

Mistress Wang took down her tea-shop sign, locked the front door, and went over through the back yard.

“Sit at the head of the table, sister-in-law,” said Wu Song. “Godmother, sit opposite.”

The women had heard from Ximen, and they drank wine unconcernedly. “What can he do about it!” they thought.

Wu Song also invited a silversmith neighbor, Yao Wenqing, whose shop was on the other side of the house.

“I'm pretty busy,” said Yao. “I won't bother you, Constable.”

Wu Song pulled him. “Just a cup of weak wine. It won't be for long. Over at our place.”

Yao couldn't get out of it. Wu Song seated him beside Mistress Wang. He went next to two shops across the street. The one which sold paper horses for funeral burning was run by Zhao Zhongming.

“I can't leave my business,” said Zhao. “I won't be able to join you.”

“Don't be like that. All the other neighbors have come.” Wu Song wouldn't take no for an answer. He practically dragged him home. “You're of our father's generation,” he said. He seated Zhao next to Golden Lotus.

Then he invited Hu Zhengqing, who sold chilled wine across the street. Hu had once been a small functionary. He could sense that something was wrong and didn't want to come. But Wu Song paid no attention to his excuses. He hauled him over and sat him next to Zhao.

“Who lives on the other side of your shop, godmother?” Wu Song queried.

“Grandpa Zhang. He peddles noodles.”

It happened that Zhang was home. He was startled to see Wu Song. “Is there something on your mind, Constable?” he asked.

“Our family has been a nuisance to you neighbors. We'd like you to have a cup of weak wine with us.”

“Aiya, I've never shown your family any special courtesy,” protested the old man. “Why should you invite me?”

“It's not worth mentioning. Please come.”

Wu Song hustled Grandpa Zhang over and requested him to sit next to Yao the silversmith.

Why, you might ask, hadn't any of the earlier arrivals left? Because there were soldiers at the doors, front and back, standing guard!

Wu Song had invited four neighbors. These, plus Mistress Wang and Golden Lotus, made a total of six. He pulled over a stool, sat down at the end of the table and directed the soldiers to close the doors, front and back. The soldier who had remained in the rear room now came and poured the wine. Wu Song hailed the assemblage politely.

“Neighbors, forgive my crudeness and drink a few cups with me.”

“We never gave you a feast to welcome you home from your journey,” the neighbors courteously replied, “and yet you go to so much trouble!”

Wu Song smiled. “It's nothing at all. Please don't laugh at our humble fare.”

As the soldier poured the wine, the neighbors could sense something was brewing, but they didn't know what to do about it. After three cups, Hu the chilled-wine merchant stood up.

“I'm rather busy...” he began.

“You can't leave, now that you're here,” Wu Song said loudly. “No matter how busy you are, you'll have to stay.”

Hu's heart clanged like fifteen buckets in a single well. “Since he was polite enough to invite me here for wine,” he thought, “how can he treat me like this? Why does he refuse to let me go?” Nevertheless, Hu resumed his seat.

“Another round of wine,” ordered Wu Song.

The soldier filled the cups for the fourth round. By the time they reached the seventh, the guests were very apprehensive. “Remove the cups,” Wu Song shouted to the soldier. “We'll have more later.” Wu Song wiped the table, and the neighbors started to leave. He spread his arms and stopped them.

“Now we're going to talk. Is there someone among you respected neighbors who is able to write?”

“Hu Zhengqing writes extremely well,” said Yao the silversmith.

Wu Song addressed Hu courteously. “Permit me to trouble you.” He rolled up his sleeves and from inside his garments whipped out his knife. Four fingers clutched the hilt, his thumb pointed at his chest, his eyes glared round and fierce.

“In the presence of you honorable neighbors, 'the culprit must pay for his wrong, the debtor for his debt.' I ask only that you be witnesses!”

With his left hand he grasped his sister-in-law, with his right he indicated Mistress Wang. The four neighbors stared and gaped. At a loss, they looked at each other. None of them dared utter a sound.

“Please don't reproach me,” said Wu Song. “There's no need to be alarmed. I'm crude but fearless. My motto is 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.' No harm shall come to any of you. I request only that you witness this. But if anyone tries to go, don't be surprised if I change my tune and stick him half a dozen times, or even take his life, though I pay for it with my own!”

Bug-eyed, the neighbors sat petrified.

Wu Song glared at Mistress Wang. “Now listen carefully, you old bitch! You are responsible for my brother's death! I want you to answer my questions!”

He turned and faced Golden Lotus. “Trollop! How did you scheme and kill my brother? Tell the truth and I'll spare you!”

“Brother-in-law, you're acting outrageously! Your brother died of pains in the heart. It had nothing to do with me!”

Before the words were out of her mouth Wu Song rammed the knife into the table, grabbed her hair with his left hand and clutched her bodice with his right. He kicked the table over, lightly lifted her across, placed her on her back before the altar table, and stood on her. Again he seized the knife in his right hand and pointed at Mistress Wang.

“Speak, old bitch! And make sure it's the truth!”

The old woman knew there was no escape. “Don't lose your temper, Constable,” she said. “I'll talk!”

Wu Song directed the soldier to bring the pen and paper and ink and lay them on the table. With his knife he indicated Hu the former functionary. “Write this down, please, word for word!”

Hu stammered his consent. He ground the ink, added water, took up the pen, smoothed the paper and said: “Mistress Wang, give us me facts.”

“It has nothing to do with me. What shall I say?”

“Old bitch,” Wu Song grated. “I know everything! You can't lie your way out of it! If you don't talk, first I'll carve up this harlot, then I'll kill you, old dog!”

He flashed the knife twice close to Golden Lotus's face. The girl was panic-stricken.

“Spare me, brother-in-law! Let me up! I'll speak!”

Wu Song picked her up and set her kneeling before the altar table. “Speak, wanton, and be quick about it!”

Golden Lotus was scared witless. She had no choice but to tell the whole story, starting from the day she beaned Ximen Qing with the curtain pole. How they used the sewing of the burial garments as a means of getting into bed together, how Ximen kicked Wu the Elder, how they arranged to poison him, how Mistress Wang taught them and egged them on—she related everything from beginning to end. Wu Song made her pause after each sentence so that Hu could write it down.

“Treacherous snake,” cried Mistress Wang. “You've spilled it all! How can I deny anything? You've put me on the spot!”

The old woman also confessed, and her every word was noted by Hu. Then both women were compelled to impress their thumb prints and make their marks. The four neighbors signed their names and made their marks also.

Wu Song had the soldier tie Mistress Wang's hands behind her back with his sash. He rolled up the confessions and put them inside his robe. Wu Song told the soldier to put a bowl of sacrificial wine before the altar table, then he pushed the two women to their knees in front of the memorial tablet.

“Brother, your spirit is near,” Wu Song cried. “Today I shall avenge you!”

He ordered the soldier to light the paper money replicas. Golden Lotus could guess what was coming. She opened her mouth to scream. Wu Song yanked her over backwards by the head, planted a foot on each arm, and tore open her bodice. Quicker than it takes to tell, he plunged the knife into

her breast and cut. Then, clenching the knife in his teeth, he ripped her chest open with both hands, pulled out her heart, liver and entrails, and placed them on the memorial tablet. Another slash of the knife, and he cut the girl's head off. Blood gushed all over the floor.

The staring neighbors covered their faces. Terrified by Wu Song's savagery, they could only obey his commands. Wu Song sent the soldier upstairs for a quilt, and wrapped Golden Lotus's head in it. He wiped his knife, stuck it in his boot, washed his hands, and spoke to the four neighbors respectfully.

“I hope you won't mind, but I must ask you to wait upstairs. I will return shortly.”

The neighbors exchanged glances. They dared not refuse. They went upstairs and sat down. Wu Song instructed the soldier to take Mistress Wang upstairs too and keep her under guard. He locked the door to the upper story and told the other two soldiers to stand watch below.

With the head of Golden Lotus wrapped in a quilt, Wu Song went directly to Ximen's medicinal drug shop. He hailed the manager.

“Is Right Honorable in?”

“He just left.”

“Please walk with me a few steps. I have something to say in private.”

The manager recognized Wu Song. He dared not refuse. Wu Song led him to a secluded lane. Suddenly Wu Song's face hardened.

“Do you want to live or die?”

“Constable, I've never done you any harm....”

“If you want to die, don't tell me where Ximen's gone. If you want to live, tell me truly where he's at.”

“He just went... with an acquaintance to... to that big tavern at the foot of Lion Bridge....”

Wu Song turned and strode off. The manager was paralyzed with fright. It was several minutes before he was able to totter back to the medicine shop.

At the Lion Bridge tavern Wu Song asked a waiter: “Who is the Right Honorable Ximen drinking with?”

“An acquaintance. They're upstairs in the room overlooking the street.”

Constable Wu charged up the stairs. Through a window in the lattice wall he looked in. Ximen was sitting in the host's place. His guest was seated opposite. Two singsong girls sat one on either side.

Wu Song shook open the quilt and rolled out the bloody head. He picked it up with his left hand, grasped his knife with his right, swept the door curtain aside, plunged into the room, and threw the gory head in Ximen's face.

Ximen saw that it was Wu Song. *“Aiya!”* he exclaimed. He leaped on a bench and swung one leg over the window-sill, intending to flee. But he was too high above the street to jump. Ximen was in a panic.

Quicker than it takes to tell, Wu Song vaulted onto the table and kicked off the cups and dishes. The two singsong girls were petrified. The wealthy guest, hysterically scrambling to get out of the way, fell to the floor.

Because Wu Song was coming at him in a wild rush, Ximen feinted with his hands and lashed out with his right foot. Wu Song dodged, but the kick caught his right hand and sent the knife flying. It dropped clattering to the street. Ximen took heart. He feinted with his right, and threw a swift left jab at Wu Song's chest. Wu Song ducked and came in under it. With his left hand he seized Ximen between the head and shoulder, with his right he grabbed Ximen's right leg, then lifted him high.

“Down you go!” he shouted.

For Ximen, firstly, he was harassed by the wronged ghost of Wu the Elder. Secondly, he had offended against Heaven's laws. And thirdly, how could he cope with Wu Song's super human strength? Head down, feet up, he

plummeted into the center of the street and landed on his noggin with a crunch that left him half senseless, startling the passers-by.

Wu Song reached under a stool, picked up Golden Lotus's head, then leaped through the window down into the street. He picked up the fallen knife and approached his foe. Ximen was lying flat, already half dead. Only his eyes moved. Wu Song pressed down on him and with one sweep of the knife cut off his head.

He tied the two heads together by the hair. Holding them in one hand and the knife in the other, he hurried back to Purple Stone Street and shouted for the soldiers to open the door. He placed the heads as sacrifices before the memorial tablet and ceremoniously spilled a bowl of wine onto the floor.

“Brother, your spirit is near,” he said, weeping. “Go up to Heaven! I have avenged you! I have killed the adulterous pair! Now I will burn your memorial tablet!”

He told the soldier to ask the neighbors upstairs to come down, and instructed him to bring down Mistress Wang. Again taking up his knife and the two heads, he confronted the neighbors.

“Please listen. I still have something to say.”

The four neighbors clasped their hands and stood politely. “Speak, Constable. We are listening.”

Wu Song said a few words, and as a result the hero of Jingyang Ridge became a prisoner in a jail, the constable of Yanggu County was changed into a wandering monk.

What was it that Wu Song said? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 27
The Witch of Mengzhou Road Sells Drugged Wine
Constable Wu Meets Zhang Qing at Crossroads Rise

Wu Song said to the four neighbors: “The crime I committed to avenge my brother was proper and reasonable. Though it may mean my death, I have no regrets. I'm sorry I frightened you. I'm going to give myself up now. I don't know whether I'll live or die. First I'll burn my brother's memorial tablet. May I trouble you to sell my possessions to raise money for my trial? Today I shall surrender to the magistrate. All I want you to do is to testify and tell the truth, regardless of the consequences.”

He burned the memorial tablet and the paper ingot replicas, then brought two trunks down from upstairs, opened them and gave their contents to the neighbors. Next, he set out for the magistracy, escorting Mistress Wang and carrying the two heads. The whole county town was in an uproar. Countless watchers lined the streets.

When the magistrate heard who was coming and why, he was shocked. He immediately called his court into session. Wu Song brought Mistress Wang forward and knelt. He placed the murder knife and the two heads before the dais. Wu Song knelt to the left, Mistress Wang knelt in the middle, and the neighbors knelt to the right. Constable Wu took out the confessions which Hu had written down and read them from beginning to end.

The magistrate had the recorder question Mistress Wang. What she answered corresponded with her confession. The four neighbors gave corroborating testimony. Coroner Ho and Yunge were called. They also offered clear evidence.

Guarded by a court officer and the coroner's assistants, all those concerned in the case returned to Purple Stone Street, where the body of Golden Lotus was examined. They went next to the street outside the tavern at Lion Bridge for an inspection of Ximen's corpse. Certificates stating the circumstances surrounding the death were filled out, after which all returned to the county office and the certificates were submitted. The magistrate ordered that long racks be fitted to the necks of Wu Song and Mistress Wang and that they be committed to jail. The witnesses were lodged in the gate house.

The magistrate considered Wu Song a gallant principled man. He remembered the mission Wu Song had undertaken for him to the capital and

his various good qualities. He wanted very much to help him. He summoned the court officers.

“That Wu Song is a loyal fellow. We'll change the indictment to this: 'Wu Song, wishing to sacrifice to the memory of his brother, was prevented by his sister-in-law, and for that reason they quarrelled. She tried to knock down the memorial tablet, Wu Song sought to protect it, and they fought, in the course of which he killed her. Ximen Qing, who was her adulterous lover, intervened. The two men battled, evenly matched, all the way to Lion Bridge, and there the lover was killed.'”

The new indictment was read to Wu Song and the others involved. The magistrate wrote an order directing that all concerned be taken under guard to Dongping Prefecture for disposition of the case by the prefect.

Although Yanggu was only a small county it had men who appreciated chivalry. Leading families gave Wu Song donations of silver. Others sent him wine and food and money and rice. Wu Song went to his quarters, packed his luggage and entrusted it to one of his soldiers. He sent Yunge twenty or thirty ounces of silver to use in looking after his father. More than half the men under his command presented Wu Song with meat and wine.

Armed with the transfer order, the county officers in charge wrapped up Coroner Ho's cremation record, the silver Ximen had given him, the charred bones, the confessions and the murder weapon and proceeded with his charges to Dongping Prefecture. By the time they got to the prefectural office a noisy crowd was waiting at the gates.

Chen Wenzhao, the prefect, on hearing of their arrival, immediately called his court into session. An intelligent official, Chen already knew about the matter. He had them brought before him and read the report from Yanggu County. Next, he looked over the record of the testimony and questioned each of the witnesses. He directed the keeper of stores to retain the various exhibits and the murder weapon, had Wu Song's heavy rack exchanged for a light one, and committed him to jail. A heavy rack was placed around Mistress Wang's neck and nailed fast. She was locked in a cell for the condemned.

The county officers were allowed to return. As to Coroner Ho, Yunge and the four neighbors, the prefect said: “These six can go home. Let them stay there until further notice. The wife of the principal Ximen Qing must wait here in the prefecture. When I receive instructions from the imperial authorities I will render a detailed judgment.”

The county officers and the six returned to Yanggu. Wu Song remained in jail. Several soldiers brought him food.

Prefect Chen sympathized with Wu Song, and thought him a gallant high-minded person. He frequently sent people to inquire after him. As a result, none of the jailers asked him for a single penny, in fact they brought him food and wine. Chen lightened the charges against Wu Song still further, and sent the case up to the Legal Office of the Imperial Government for examination and decision. At the same time he dispatched a trusted emissary to the capital with confidential letters to friends in the Ministry of Criminal Proceedings.

These discussed the matter with the Legal Office, and then rendered the following decision: *Whereas Mistress Wang stimulated sexual cravings and adulterous desires; and whereas she instigated the woman to poison her husband; and whereas she told the woman to prevent Wu Song from sacrificing to the memory of his brother, as a result of which he killed her; and whereas she provoked the man and woman into indecent behavior: it is therefore decided that Mistress Wang shall be executed by being sliced to death. Wu Song, although he was avenging his brother when he fought and killed the adulterer Ximen Qing, and although he voluntarily surrendered, cannot be completely exonerated. He is to be given forty strokes on the back, tattooed with the mark of the criminal and exiled to a place two thousand* li *distant. The adulterous couple committed major crimes, but they are dead and no more need be said about them. The other persons involved in the case are free to return to their homes.*

This decision is to be implemented immediately upon receipt.

When Prefect Chen read this document he summoned before his court Coroner Ho, Yunge, the four neighbors and the wife of Ximen Qing. Wu Song was brought from jail. The decision from the Imperial Government

was read to him. The rack was removed, and he was given forty strokes. The jailers saw to it that only six or seven actually cut his flesh. A seven-and-a-half-catty rack was fastened around his neck and the mark of the criminal was tattooed in two lines on his face. The prefect exiled him to prison in the district town of Mengzhou. The others, in accordance with the decision, were allowed to go home.

Mistress Wang was brought from her cell to hear the verdict of the Imperial Government. The reason for the execution was written on a placard; and the prisoner signed her acknowledgement. She was then tied seated on a wooden “donkey” with three ropes and nailed to it by four long spikes driven through her limbs.

The prefect of Dongping gave his order: “Slice, her!”

Mistress Wang and the “donkey” were carried out by strong bearers and paraded through the streets. Terrible drums rumbled, frightful gongs sounded. With the placard in the fore and staff-bearers bringing up the rear, with two sharp knives held aloft and a bunch of paper flowers waving, the procession marched to the center of the city. There Mistress Wang was sliced to death.

Wu Song, wearing a light rack for walking, witnessed the execution. Neighbor Yao gave him the money he had obtained by selling the constable's possessions, bid him farewell and went home. Two guards were assigned by the court to take Wu Song to Mengzhou. The work of the prefect was done.

Wu Song and his guards set out. His orderly gave him the luggage he had been looking after and returned to Yangku. The three men left Dongping Prefecture and proceeded slowly along the winding road to Mengzhou. The guards knew Wu Song was a man of chivalry, and they treated him with gingerly respect. Observing this, he was generous with the money in his pack, and bought them meat and wine at village inns.

We'll cut the idle chatter. Wu Song had killed in the beginning of the third month, he had spent two months in jail, and now he was on the road. That made it the middle of the year. The blazing sun overhead was hot enough to

crack stones and melt metal. They could march only in the cool of the early morning.

After some three weeks of travel, they came to a big road. Near the crest of a hill they paused. It was mid-morning.

“Let's not rest here,” said Wu Song. “When we get to the bottom again, we'll find a place to eat and drink.”

“A good idea,” said the guards.

As they rounded the top of the hill, they looked down. In the distance below was a thatched house. A pennant indicating that wine was sold there hung from a willow abutting a stream.

Wu Song pointed. “A tavern.”

The three hurried down the slope. Beside a bluff they met a fuel seller carrying a load of wood. Wu Song hailed him.

“Would you mind telling us what this place is called?”

“This hill is Mengzhou Road Hill. There ahead, beside that grove of large trees, is Crossroads Rise.”

Wu Song and the guards continued on. At Crossroads Rise the first thing they saw was a huge tree. Even four or five men holding hands couldn't encompass it. Thick withered vines coiled up around its trunk. Beyond the tree was the tavern they had seen earlier.

A woman was seated outside beside a window. She wore a green silk tunic. Her hair was adorned with gleaming golden pins and wild flowers. When she saw Wu Song and the two guards approaching, she rose and came forward to greet them. A crimson skirt of fine silk draped the lower half of her body. Her face was rouged and powdered. Her open tunic revealed a peach-colored silk blouse with gold buttons.

“Rest a while, travellers,” she said. “We have good meat and wine here. And if you'd like a delicacy, you can try our big dumplings.”

The three men went inside. The guards rested their staves against a table and stools made of cypress, untied their bucklers, and sat down. Wu Song removed the pack from his back and put it on the table. He unwound his sash and took off his shirt.

“There's no one here to see,” said the guards. “We'll take off your rack on our own responsibility. You'll be able to drink a few bowls of wine in comfort.”

They peeled off the seals, opened the rack and put it on the floor beneath the table. All three stripped to the waist and hung their garments on the window sill. The woman, smiling, came up to them.

“How much wine do you want?”

“Never mind about that,” said Wu Song. “Just heat it and keep it coming. And slice four or five catties of meat. Add up the bill and I'll pay you.”

“Our big dumplings are also very good.”

“Bring us twenty or thirty as a side dish.”

Giggling, the woman went into the rear and brought out a large bucket of wine. She set three big bowls on the table and three pairs of chopsticks, then sliced two platters of meat. After serving four or five rounds of wine, she pulled a hamper of steamed dumplings from the stove and placed it before the men. The guards immediately began to eat.

Wu Song broke one of the dumplings open. “What's in these?” he asked. “Human flesh, or dog's?”

The woman giggled. “You're teasing. Who ever heard of such a thing in these times of peace and clear skies? For generations our family has served nothing but dumplings of pure beef.”

“In my wanderings among the gallant fraternity I've often heard men say: 'What traveler dares stop by the big tree at Crossroads Rise? The fat ones become filling for dumplings, the thin ones fill up the stream!'”

“Who would say such a thing? You're just making it up!”

“There are hairs in this dumpling that look a lot like pubic hairs. They made me suspicious,” said Wu Song. “Why isn't your husband around, madam?”

“He's away on a trading trip.”

“You must be lonely, here all by yourself.”

Smiling, the woman thought: “This criminal exile dares toy with me! He must want to die! 'The moth seeks the flame.' Well, he's brought it on himself. I'll fix the cold!” Aloud she said: “Quit your joking. Have a few more bowls of wine and then cool off beneath the tree. Or you can rest here in the house if you like.”

“She's up to something,” though Wu Song. “I'll kid her along.”

“This wine is pretty flat,” he said. “If you have any thing better, we might try a couple of bowls.”

“I have a wine with an excellent bouquet, but it's a bit muddy.”

“Fine. The muddier the better.”

The woman smiled grimly to herself. She went in and brought out a pot of turbid wine.

Wu Song looked at it and said: “This is a very good wine indeed. It tastes best when it's heated.”

“You certainly know your wines. I'll warm it right up.” The woman laughed and thought to herself: “That criminal exile really deserves to die. So he wants it warm! That will make the drug work all the faster. I've got the knave in the palm of my hand!”

She heated the wine, poured out three bowls and smiled. “Try this, gentlemen.”

The two guards couldn't wait. They raised their bowls and drank.

“I've never been able to drink without something to go with it,” said Wu Song. “Slice me some more meat.”

As soon as the woman went to the rear, Wu Song poured the wine in a dark corner. Then he smacked his lips and said with relish: “Excellent! This wine has a real kick in it!”

The woman only pretended to go for the meat. She quickly returned. Clapping her hands, she cried: “Down you go! Down you go!”

To the guards it seemed as if the heavens were whirling. Stricken dumb, they fell over backwards. Wu Song pretended to close his eyes and collapse face up beside his stool.

He heard the woman laugh and say: “Got you! 'Wretched scoundrels it's only meet, you drink the water that washed my feet!'“ And she called: “All right, fellows! Out here, quick!”

A couple of big bruisers hurried into the room and, on her instructions, carried out the two guards. They returned for Wu Song, but they couldn't lift him. He lay there, inert. He seemed to weigh a thousand catties.

“Useless oafs,” the woman snarled. “All you can do is eat! You're good for nothing else! I'll handle this myself!”

She slipped out of her green tunic and crimson skirt. Arms bare, she picked up Wu Song effortlessly. He promptly hugged her close to his chest and wrapped both legs around her thighs in a scissors grip. The woman squealed like a stuck pig, and the bruisers came rushing back. Wu Song roared at them so fiercely that they stopped dead in their tracks with fright. Inexorably, he pressed the woman to the floor.

“Spare me, good fellow,” she pleaded. She no longer dared to struggle.

Just then a man put down a load of fuel outside the tavern entrance. When he saw Wu Song crushing the woman he bounded in with large strides.

“Let her go, good fellow,” he exclaimed. “Spare her! I have something to say!”

Wu Song jumped up, planted his left foot on the prostrate woman, and faced him with clenched fists. The man wore a head kerchief of indented black silk, a white cloth tunic, puttees, eight-thonged hemp sandals, and a sash around his waist. He had a protuberant forehead and prominent cheek-bones. A wispy beard adorned his chin. He was about thirty-five or six.

Clasping his hands respectfully before his chest, he gazed at Wu Song and queried: “May I ask your name, sir?”

“En route or at rest my name is the same. I am Wu Song—constable!”

“Not the Constable Wu who killed the tiger on Jingyang Ridge?”

“The same.”

The man dropped to his knees and kowtowed. “I have long known your fame, and today I have been fortunate enough to meet you!”

“Are you the husband of this woman?”

“Yes, she's my wife. She 'has eyes but didn't recognize Mount Taishan.' How has she offended you, Constable? Please, for my sake, forgive her.”

Wu Song quickly helped the woman to her feet. “I can see that you two are no ordinary pair. I would like to know your names.”

The man bade his wife dress and kowtow to the constable.

“I'm afraid I knocked you about a little, sister,” said Wu Song. “Please excuse me.”

“I didn't know a good man when I saw one, and made a mistake. I hope you'll forgive me. Please come into the parlor and sit.”

“Who are you two? How did you know my name?”

“My family name is Zhang,” said the man. “My given name is Qing. I used to tend the vegetable garden in the Guangming Monastery. I got into an argument over a small thing and lost my temper. I killed the monks and burned the monastery to the ground. But nothing happened. The police didn't inquire, and I became a robber on the rise near that big tree there. One day I saw an old man coming along, carrying a load on a shoulder-pole. I thought I could take him easily because of his age. But when I went to snatch his things, he fought. We battled twenty rounds and, with his pole, he knocked me head over heels.

“It turned out that he himself had been a robber when he was young. Seeing how nimble I was, he took me to the city with him taught me many tricks and gave me his daughter in marriage. But I didn't like it in the city, so I came back here and built this thatched house and opened a tavern.”

“Actually, we wait for travellers to come, and do them in. I know a lot of men in the gallant fraternity, and they call me Zhang Qing the Vegetable Gardener. My wife's family name is Sun. She learned all her father's skills, and she's known as Sun the Witch.”

“Just now when I came home I heard my wife screaming. I never thought it was because she ran into you, Constable! I've told her time and again: “There are three kinds of persons you mustn't harm. The first are wandering monks. They lead hard lives and have renounced the material world.' In spite of that, she nearly finished a remarkable fellow, a former major in Old General Zhong's garrison in Yanan Prefecture, a man named Lu Da. He killed a fellow called Lord of the West with three blows of his fist, fled to Mount Wutai, shaved his hair off and became a monk. Because his back is tattooed, he's known in the gallant fraternity as Sagacious Lu the Tattooed Monk. He carries an iron staff weighing about sixty catties. Well, he came here and drank our drugged wine. But when I returned and saw that staff of his, I knew he was out of the ordinary. I quickly gave him a potion to bring him round, and we pledged each other as blood brothers. I hear that recently he took over the Precious Pearl Monastery on Two-Dragon Mountain, and that he and a fellow called Yang Zhi the Blue-Faced Beast have turned bandit and are using it as their stronghold. He keeps sending word for me to join him, but I can't go.”

“They're both well known in the gallant fraternity.”

“Unfortunately, there was another monk, a big tall fellow, that my wife drugged. I got home too late for that one. His four limbs had already been cut off. All that's left of him today is a brass-bound iron rod, his black robe, and his monk's certificate. There's nothing else of any importance, except for two rare items. One is a rosary carved from a hundred and eight human pate bones. The other is a pair of knives of the finest snowflake steel. That monk must have killed a lot of men. To this day the knives still moan in the night. I feel awful that I wasn't able to save him. I still think of him often.”

“'The second kind,' I told my wife, 'are travelling singsong girls. They go from town to town and have to put up with all sorts of whims and servilely accept all kinds of abuse to earn their money. If we kill one of them, word will get around, and they'll sing about it on the stage. The gallant fraternity will say we have no chivalry.”

“'The third kind,' I told her, 'are men who have been condemned to exile. There are many bold fellows among them, and you're not to harm them.' I never thought she'd disobey me. Today, she's disturbed you, Constable. Luckily, I came home early. How could you do such a thing, wife?”

“I didn't mean to, at first,” said the Witch. “But his pack was full and heavy, and I thought he was trying to get fresh. That's what gave me the idea.”

“I'm a man of principle. I'd never make game of a good woman,” said Wu Song. “But I saw sister eyeing my pack, and I became suspicious. I purposely spoke loosely to provoke you into showing your hand. I spilled out the wine you gave me and pretended to be drugged. Then when you lifted me, I grabbed you and forced you down. Sister, forgive me.”

Zhang Qing laughed heartily and invited Wu Song to the parlor in the rear. After they were seated he said: “What is your crime, Constable, may I ask? Where are you being exiled to?”

Wu Song related in detail how and why he killed Ximen Qing and his sister-in-law. The tavern keeper and his wife listened with delight and admiration.

“I have something to say,” said Zhang Qing. “Would the constable be willing to hear me?”

“Go ahead, brother,” replied Wu Song. “Speak freely.”

Calmly, slowly, Zhang Qing spoke a few sentences. And as a result, Wu Song caused an uproar in Mengzhou Town, a commotion in Anping Stockade. A man who could drag an ox or an elephant was toppled, a stalwart who could grapple with a dragon or seize a tiger was knocked flat.

What then was it that Zhang Qing said to Wu Song? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 28
Wu Song's Prestige Shakes Anping Stockade
Shi En Retakes Happy Grove

“It's not that I'm a wicked man,” said Zhang Qing, “but wouldn't it be better, instead of suffering hardships in prison, to knock off these two guards, and stay here for a time? If you want to head for the hills, I'll take you to Precious Pearl Monastery on Two-Dragon Mountain, and you can join up with Sagacious Lu. How about it?”

“That's very considerate of you, brother. There's just one thing: All my life I've fought only tough rogues. These guards have been very kind to me all along the road. If I kill them, Heaven will not forgive me. Save them, if you respect me. Don't do them any harm.”

“Since you're so chivalrous, Constable, I'll bring them round.”

Zhang Qing had his men remove the guards from the chopping block, and his wife concocted a brew. Pulling the guards' ears, Zhang poured the medicine down their throats. Before long, they awakened as if from a dream and crawled to their feet. They looked at Wu Song.

“How did we get so drunk? That certainly is fine wine! We didn't drink much, but we really got sozzled. We must remember this place, and stop here for some more on the way back.”

Wu Song laughed, and Zhang and his wife chuckled. The guards were mystified.

The two assistants slaughtered chickens and geese, cooked a meal, and laid a table with cups and platters. Zhang told them to put it in the rear garden beneath the grape arbor, where he invited Wu Song and the guards to be seated. Wu Song had the guards sit at the head of the table. He and Zhang sat opposite. The wife sat at the side. The assistants kept pouring wine and bringing platters of food.

Zhang drank with Wu Song until dark. He showed the constable the pair of knives. They were indeed of the finest steel, and obviously hadn't been made in a day. The two spoke of feats of good fellows in the gallant fraternity, of deeds of murder and arson.

“Song Jiang of Shandong, or Timely Rain as he's called, is a loyal, generous man of magnificent courage,” said Wu Song. “Because of something that's happened, he also had to take refuge in Lord Chai's manor.”

When the guards heard who their prisoner's friends were, they grew petrified with fear. Dropping to their knees, they kowtowed.

“I've put you two to the trouble of bringing me this far,” said Wu Song. “Would I have let you do that if I intended to kill you? No need to fear when I talk of the gallant fraternity. I've never harmed a good person. Just relax and drink your wine. Tomorrow, when we get to Mengzhou, I'll show my appreciation to you both.”

That night, all rested in Zhang Qing's home.

The next day Wu Song wanted to leave, but Zhang Qing wouldn't hear of it. He entertained him for three days in succession. Wu Song was very grateful. The two pledged each other as blood brothers, with Wu Song as the younger, since Zhang was nine years his senior.

Finally, Wu Song took his departure. Zhang gave him a farewell drinking party, then returned his luggage, pack and purse, presented him with ten ounces of silver, and handed two or three silver pieces to the guards. Wu

Song gave his ten ounces to the guards as well. He put on his rack, which again was sealed. Zhang and his wife walked with him to the gate. Wu Song said goodbye with tears in his eyes and set off for Mengzhou.

He and the guards reached the town before noon. They went to the prefectural court and presented the documents from Dongping Prefecture. The prefect read them, accepted charge of Wu Song, wrote a receipt of prisoner for the guards and told them to return. Of them we'll say no more.

Wu Song was taken to the prison. Above the entrance was a plaque, with the words: “Anping Stockade.” The local guards put him in a room by himself, turned over his papers and got a receipt. No more need be said of that.

A dozen or so ordinary prisoners came over. “If you have a letter of introduction or any silver in your pack, good fellow,” they said, “take them out, and when the head keeper comes, give them to him. Then they'll go easy on you when they give you the Spirit-Breaking Beating. It'll be cruel if you have no present for him. We're ordinary prisoners like yourself. That's why we're letting you know. 'When the rabbit dies, the fox mourns. All are of the same animal kingdom.' You're new here. We were afraid you might not have heard.”

“Thank you for telling me. I happen to have a few things with me. If he asks me nicely, I'll give him some. If he acts tough, I won't give him a penny!”

“Don't talk like that,” cried the prisoners. “You know the old sayings: 'Fear not officials—except when they officiate!' and 'Neath a low-eaved roof who dares raise his head?' It's better to be careful!”

Before they had finished speaking, someone said: “Here comes the head keeper!” They all scattered.

Wu Song opened his pack and sat waiting in his room. The man entered the building and inquired: “Which one of you is the new prisoner?”

“I am, sir,” said Wu Song.

“You've got eyes, haven't you? Why must you wait for me to ask? I hear you're the man who beat the tiger to death on Jingyang Ridge and was a constable in Yanggu County. I thought you'd know a thing or two. How can you be so dull-witted? In this place of mine, here, you'd better not hit so much as a cat!”

“All this talk is because you want me to give you a present, I suppose? Not half a penny! Maybe you'd like a taste of my fine two fists? I've got money, but I'm keeping that to buy myself wine. What are you going to do about it? If you don't like it, you can sent me back to Yanggu County!”

The head keeper stamped off in a rage. Once more the other prisoners crowded around.

“You shouldn't have talked back to him,” they exclaimed. “Now you're going to suffer. He'll tell the warden, and you'll surely be killed!”

“I'm not afraid. He can do what he likes! I'll be civilized if he will. If it's battle he wants, I'll give it to him!”

Just then three or four guards came and shouted for the new prisoner.

“Here is your lord,” said Wu Song. “I haven't left. What are you yelling about?”

The guards escorted him to the examination room, where the warden was formally seated. Half a dozen soldiers pushed Wu Song forward. The warden directed them to remove the rack.

“Prisoner, know this,” he said. “The Emperor of Military Virtue, first emperor of Song, decreed that all exiles, when they first arrive, shall be beaten a hundred blows to break their spirit. Guards, hold him prone!”

“Don't move, not one of you! If you want to beat me, go ahead! No one need hold me! If I dodge one blow, I'm no true man! You can start all over from the beginning! I'm not the courageous fellow from Yanggu County if I utter a single cry!”

The onlookers laughed. “That lunatic wants to die. We'll see how much he can take!”

“Hit hard. Merciful blows only annoy me!”

This remark provoked more laughter from the people on both sides of the room. Just then a young man standing beside the warden whispered something in the official's ear. Of average height, he was about twenty-five, with a fair complexion, a mustache and goatee. A white kerchief bound his head, and he wore a black silk tunic. One hand was bandaged with white silk strips.

The warden addressed the prisoner: “Wu Song, were you ill during your journey here?”

“No, I drank wine, I ate meat and rice, and I walked without falter.”

“This scoundrel was sick on the way,” the warden announced. “I can see from his complexion that he's just recovered. We'll put the beating off for the time being.”

“Say you were ill, quick,” the beaters on either side of Wu Song whispered. “The warden is giving you a break! Say you were sick and be done with it!”

“I wasn't sick. I wasn't! Beat me. Get it over with. Let's have no delays. I don't want deferred payments that you can collect at any time!”

Again the onlookers laughed, and the warden joined them.

“Not only were you ill, but you must be still running a high fever to talk so deliriously! Pay no attention to him. Guards, take him back to the single room.”

Three soldiers returned Wu Song to his quarters. The prisoners all hurried over to question him. “Did you bring a letter from some good friend of the warden?”

“Not I.”

“Then postponing the beating is not a good sign. Tonight, they'll certainly finish you off!”

“How?”

“In the evening they'll bring you two bowls of dry brown rice. When you're full, they'll take you to an earthen dungeon, tie you, roll you up in a straw mat, stuff your seven openings, and put you, head down, against the wall. In less than half a watch you'll be dead. That's called the 'upside down bowl' method.”

“Is that their only way?”

“Another is also to tie you up, then put a huge sack of sand on you. You're finished in less than a watch. That's called the 'sack of earth' method.”

“'What else do they do?”

“Those two are the most frightful. The others aren't so bad.”

Just then an army man entered with a hamper. “Which one is the new prisoner Constable Wu?” he asked.

“I am,” said Wu Song. “What's on your mind?”

“The warden told me to bring you this snack.”

Wu Song looked. There was a measure of wine, a platter of meat, another of noodles, and a large bowl of broth. “Does this mean they're going to work on me when I've finished?” he wondered. “I'll eat first and think about that later!”

He drained the wine at one go, then he ate all the meat and noodles. The man collected the dishes and left. Wu Song sat musing in his room. He laughed coldly. “Let's see what they're going to try!”

At dusk, the man came again with the hamper.

“What do you want?” asked Wu Song.

“I was told to bring your evening meal,” the man replied. He laid out several vegetable dishes, another large measure of wine, a big platter of fried meat, a bowl of fish soup, and a large bowl of rice.

“They're sure to kill me after I've finished this,” Wu Song said to himself. “Let them! At least I'll be a well fed ghost! Eat first, and decide what to do later!”

Wu Song consumed the meal. The man collected the dishes and departed. Not long after, he returned with another fellow. One carried a bathtub, the other a bucket of hot water.

“Your bath is ready, Constable,” they said.

“Will they strike after I've bathed?” Wu Song wondered. “Who cares! I'll have a good wash first!”

The men poured the water into the tub, and Wu Song jumped in and scrubbed. When he was through, they handed him a large towel. He dried himself and put on his clothes. One man spilled out the water and went off with the tub. The other hung up mosquito netting and laid a rattan mat and a woven bamboo pillow on his bed, for coolness. He said good night and departed.

Wu Song closed and bolted the door of his room. “What is all this, anyhow?” he thought. “It's up to them. We'll see what we shall see!”

He lay down and slept. Nothing happened that night.

He rose at dawn and opened the door. The man who had come the previous night again arrived with a bucket of hot water. After Wu Song had washed his face and rinsed his mouth, a man came and combed his hair with a fine comb, piled it in a neat knot on the top of his head, and bound it with a kerchief. Another man brought a hamper, from which he extracted a vegetable dish, a large bowl of meat broth, and a big bowl of rice.

“Whatever you may be up to,” W« Song thought, “I'm going to eat!”

When he was through, they served him a cup of tea. Only when he had finished that, did the man who brought the food speak.

“This place isn't very comfortable. If the constable would move to that room, there, we could give better service.”

“Here it comes!” Wu Song thought. “I'll go with you and see what happens!”

One man gathered Wu Song's belongings and bedding. The other led him to a room nearer the front and pushed open the door. Inside was a spotlessly clean bed, and a newly placed table and stools. Wu Song entered.

“I thought they were taking me to the earthen dungeon, and instead they bring me here,” he mused. “This is much better than that other room.”

He sat alone and rested till noon. Again the man came with the hamper and a pitcher of wine. He took out four kinds of fruit, a cooked chicken, and many steamed rolls. He segmented the tender chicken, poured the wine, and invited the constable to tuck in.

“What's going on here?” Wu Song wondered.

In the evening there was another large meal, followed by a bath and relaxation in the cool air. “I believed what those prisoners told me. Why am I being treated so well?” he said to himself.

Food and wine were delivered as usual on the morning of the third day. After breakfast, Wu Song strolled around the stockade grounds. Prisoners were carrying water, chopping kindling, and doing various odd jobs neath the open sky. It was the middle of summer, but they had no place to avoid the heat.

Hands clasped behind his back, Wu Song asked: “Why are you working in the broiling sun?”

The prisoners laughed grimly. “For us this is Heaven,” they said. “Who would dare hope for shade and a chance to sit down! There are others who

weren't able to pay any bribes. They're locked in the big dungeon, more dead than alive, spending their days in heavy chains!”

Wu Song made a circuit of the prison temple. Beside an urn for burning written prayers was a huge stone with a hole in the middle that was used on occasion as a base for a flagpole. Wu Song sat down on it for a while, then returned to his room. He was sitting there, thinking, when the man came again with meat and wine.

But enough of idle chatter. Wu Song had been in the new room for several days, during which time he was continually wined and dined, with no sign of anyone wanting to harm him. He was quite puzzled. When the man brought his meal at noon and put down the hamper, Wu Song could restrain himself no longer. He put his hand on the hamper.

“Whose household are you from?” he demanded. “Why do you keep serving me food and wine?”

“I told you the other day, Constable. I'm a trusted servant in the home of the warden.”

“Who, specifically, instructs you to bring these meals? What do they oblige me to do?”

“I'm acting on orders of the warden's son.”

“I'm a prisoner, a criminal. I haven't done a thing to benefit him. Why should the warden's son send me food?”

“I wouldn't know that, sir. My instructions were to deliver meals and not say anything for three to six months.”

“Very peculiar,” Wu Song said. “Are you trying to make me soft and fat, and then finish me off? I can't figure it out. If I don't know what's behind this food and wine, I can't consume them in peace. What sort of person is the warden's son? Where did he meet me? Unless you tell me, I won't eat his meals.”

“Do you remember the man in the examination hall with the white head kerchief and the bandaged right hand, the day you first arrived? That was the warden's son.”

“He wore a black tunic and stood beside the warden?”

“That's right.”

“Was he the one who saved me from the Spirit-Breaking Beating, then?”

“That's right.”

“Strange! I'm from Qinghe County, he's from Mengzhou. We've never met before. Why is he treating me so well? There has to be a reason. I must ask you. What's his name?”

“Shi En. He's skilled with fists and staves, and everyone calls him Golden-Eyed Tiger Cub.”

“Sounds like a good man. Ask him to come. If he's willing to meet me, I'll eat your food. If not, I won't touch a morsel!”

“He instructed me not to give you any details, and not to talk about a meeting until three months to half a year had passed.”

“Nonsense! Ask him to come and see me.”

The servant was scared, and very reluctant. But Wu Song grew angry, so he had no choice but to comply.

Shi En hastened over. He dropped at Wu Song's feet and kowtowed. The constable at once returned the courtesy.

“I am a prisoner, under your rule,” said Wu Song. “I have never had the honor of knowing you. Yet you saved me from a beating the other day, and now you sent me food and drink. It's really not right. And you haven't asked me to do a single thing. Such unmerited kindness disturbs my sleep and spoils my appetite.”

“Elder brother's fame has long thundered in my ears. I hated the long distance that separated us. Today we meet at last. I wanted to pay my respects earlier, but I had no suitable gifts, and I was ashamed. I dared not call on you.”

“Your servant said you didn't want to speak to me until after three months to half a year. What did you want to see me about?”

“That rustic has no tact. He shouldn't have said anything.”

“Must you give me this ceremonious palaver? You've got me bursting with curiosity. What exactly do you want with me?”

“Since my servant has already spoken, I might as well tell you. Because you are a big hero, a real man, there is something I must beg of you. Only you can do it. I didn't want to ask you right away, since you've travelled a long distance to get here. I thought I'd give you a few months to regain your strength.”

Wu Song laughed heartily. “Last year, after a three-month bout of malaria, I got drunk and fought a big tiger on Jingyang Ridge. With three punches and two kicks I killed it. What couldn't I do today!”

“I don't think I'd better speak yet. Recuperate a little longer. When you've completely recovered, I'll tell you the whole story.”

“You mean I haven't got my strength back? All right. How heavy is that big stone in front of the temple?”

“Probably four or five hundred catties.”

“Let's take a look. I wonder whether I can move it.”

“Please have some wine first.”

“There'll be time enough for that when we come back.”

The two men walked to the temple. The prisoners on the grounds bowed and hailed them respectfully. Wu Song shook the stone slightly. He laughed.

“This soft life is spoiling me. I'll never be able to pick it up!”

“You shouldn't scoff,” said Shi En. “That stone weighs four or five hundred catties!”

Wu Song grinned. “You really think I can't lift it? Get back, you men, and watch this.”

He slipped off his tunic and tied the sleeves around his waist. Embracing the stone, he raised it easily, then tossed it away with both hands. It dropped with a thud, sinking a foot into the earth. The watching prisoners were astonished.

Wu Song grasped the stone with his right hand and lifted. With a sudden twist, he flung it upwards. It sailed ten feet into the air. He caught it in both hands as it came down and lightly put it back in its original place. He turned and looked at Shi En and the prisoners. His face wasn't flushed, he wasn't even breathing hard, his heart beat calmly.

Shi En threw his arms around him, then kowtowed. “Fantastic, brother! Truly a god!”

The prisoners all dropped to their knees. “A god indeed!”

Shi En took Wu Song to his private residence and begged him to be seated.

“Tell me now,” said the constable. “What is it you want me to do?”

“Please sit a while. My father will be here soon to see you. Then I'll deign to trouble you.”

“You want a person to do something, don't be so wishy-washy! That's no way to get things done. Even if it needs a stab or a hack, I'll do it! If I'm toadying to you in the least, I'm no man!”

Clasping his hands respectfully together, Shi En finally spoke. And as a result, Wu Song displayed his man-destroying skill, he showed again his tiger-killing prowess. Truly, his two fists pounded like thunder, his flying kicks startled the wind and rain.

What, then, did Shi En say to Wu Song? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 29
Wu Song, Drunk, Beats Jiang the Gate Guard Giant
Shi En Once More Controls His Mengzhou Establishment

“Please be seated, brother,” said Shi En, “and I'll tell you my story in detail.”

“Don't pussyfoot around. Just give me the main points,” said Wu Song.

“Since childhood I learned jousting with spear and staff from masters in the gallant fraternity. I became known around Mengzhou as the Golden-Eyed Tiger Cub. Outside the East Gate of this town is a market village called Happy Grove. Merchants from all over Hebei and Shandong go there to trade. There are over a hundred large inns in the village, and twenty or thirty gambling houses and money exchange shops. Since I was a skilled fighter, I went to Happy Grove with eighty or ninety tough prisoners and opened a tavern. Every enterprise had to pay me regular tribute. Even singsong girls, passing through, had to see me first before they could ply their trade. Money kept coming in. There wasn't a month when I didn't collect two or three hundred ounces of silver.”

“But then Zhang, the stockade garrison commandant, came from East Luzhou. He brought with him a man named Jiang Zhong, known in the gallant fraternity as Jiang the Gate Guard Giant because he's so huge and strong. What's more, he's very skilled in weapons, and he's a marvel at rough and tumble fighting and wrestling. He says boastfully: 'I spent three years competing on Mount Taishan and never met my match. There's no one like me under the sky!' He simply moved in and took over my territory. When I tried to stop him, he gave me such a drubbing I couldn't get out of bed for two months. You saw me the other day, with my head bound and my hand bandaged. My wounds still haven't fully healed.

“Originally, I was going to take my men and have it out with him. But he has the backing of Commandant Zhang's garrison. If I created a row, it

would cause dissension with the garrison. So here I've been, burning with rage and no way to get revenge. I've known for a long time what a great fighter and man of justice you are, brother. If only you can help me hit back at that rogue, I'll be able to close my eyes peacefully when I die. But I've been afraid because you've had a long hard journey that you haven't regained your strength. I wanted to wait several months till you recovered completely, then tell you about it. I didn't expect that clod of a servant to be so loose-mouthed. That's the whole truth of the matter."

Wu Song laughed. "How many heads has Jiang the Gate Guard Giant, and how many arms?"

"Only one head and two arms. How could he have more?"

"If he had three heads and six arms, like the ogre Nezha, I might be a little worried. But since he has only one head and two arms, why should I be afraid?"

"The problem was I just wasn't strong and skilled enough to beat him."

"I'm not bragging, but all my life I've been beating tough guys and virtueless scoundrels. Since the situation is what you say, what are we doing here? Get some wine and we'll drink it on the way. I'll go with you. You can watch me pummel him like I did the tiger! If I hit him too hard and kill him, I'm quite willing to pay for it with my life!"

"Sit and wait a bit longer, brother. My father wants to see you. When it's time to go, we'll go. We mustn't be rash. Tomorrow, I'll send a man to look around. If the knave is at home, we'll go the day after. If he's not, we'll discuss this further. Barging in will only stir up the grass and alert the snake. It won't be any good if he plays a trick on us."

"No wonder he beat you up! You don't behave like a man at all! If we're going, let's go now! Never mind tomorrow, or the day after. Come on! Who cares if he expects us!"

Just then the old warden rounded a screen and entered. "I've been listening for some time, warrior," he said to Wu Song. "I'm glad to meet you. To my

son you're the sun emerging from the clouds! Please join me in the rear hall for a while."

Wu Song followed him, and the old man invited him to be seated.

"I'm prisoner," protested Wu Song. "I wouldn't dare sit in the presence of Your Honor."

"Don't talk like that, warrior. My son has been very fortunate to find you. No need for ceremony."

"Forgive me, then," begged Wu Song. He sat down opposite the warden. Shi En stood beside them.

"Why are you still standing?" asked Wu Song.

"My father is keeping you company, brother. Please make yourself at home."

"I feel uncomfortable when you act so formally."

"Since the warrior insists, and no outsiders are around..." said the warden. He indicated for his son to be seated.

A servant brought wine and tidbits. The warden personally handed Wu Song a filled cup. "Everyone has great respect for your courage, warrior. My son was doing business in Happy Grove not because he was greedy for gain, but to improve the appearance and atmosphere of our district. Then that Jiang the Gate Guard Giant, relying on the garrison's backing, muscled in and openly took over. Only a warrior hero like yourself can avenge this insult. Don't refuse my son. Drain this cup and accept his four kowtows. Let him call you elder blood brother as a sign of his respect."

"How can I, a man of no talent or learning, do that? I'd be pushing my luck too far."

But Wu Song downed the wine and Shi En kowtowed to him four times. He quickly returned the courtesy, and they pledged each other as blood

brothers. Wu Song drank freely. He became very drunk, and had to be helped to his room. Of that we'll say no more.

The next day Shi En and his father conferred. “He must be feeling the effects of all that wine he had last night. We can't ask him to go today,” said the warden. “We'll tell him that the man we sent to inquire says Jiang is not at home, and put it off another day.”

Shi En acted accordingly when he saw Wu Song, adding: “We'll start tomorrow morning, after breakfast.”

“All right,” said Wu Song. “I'll just have to suppress my wrath another day!”

They finished their morning meal, had some tea, and went for a stroll outside the prison grounds. When they returned, they chatted in the guest hall about lance techniques, and put in a few practice rounds with fists and staves.

At noon Shi En invited Wu Song into the residence, where they ate and drank many cups. Wu Song was ready to go on drinking, but he noticed that Shi En kept plying him courteously with more food. He wasn't too pleased and later, when he returned to his room, he asked the two servants, who came with his bath water, about it.

“Why did the young master give me only meat instead of letting me have more wine?”

“To tell you the truth, Constable, the warden and the young master talked it over. Originally they were going to send you to Happy Grove today, but they were afraid you wouldn't be up to it because you were drunk last night. They held back on the wine so that tomorrow you'll be in shape to go.”

“They thought because I was drunk, I wouldn't be fit?”

“That's it.”

Wu Song could barely wait for daybreak. He rose early, washed and rinsed his mouth. He bound his head with a kerchief tied in a swastika knot, put on an earth-brown tunic, a red silk waist sash, leg-wrapping to the knee, and eight thonged hemp sandals. He covered with a plaster the tattoo of the criminal on his cheek. Shi En came and invited him to his house for breakfast.

When Wu Song had finished eating Shi En said: “We've horses saddled at the stable, ready to go.”

“What do I need a horse for? I don't have small feet. There's only one thing I must ask.”

“Speak freely, brother. Is there anything I'd refuse you?”

“After we leave the town, let's operate on the principle of 'Don't pass one without having three.'”

“What do you mean by mat? I don't understand.”

Wu Song laughed. “If you want me to beat up Jiang the Gate Guard Giant, you've got to invite me to three bowls of wine at every tavern we pass.”

“It's fourteen or fifteen *li* from the East Gate of the town to Happy Grove,” Shi En thought, “and there must be a dozen taverns on the way. If he has three bowls in each, that means thirty-six bowls before he gets there. He'll be drunk. That will never do.”

Again Wu Song laughed. “You're afraid I won't be able to fight? Actually, I'm no good without wine. The more I drink, the better I am. It's only when I'm really drunk that I have my full strength. If drink hadn't given me courage on Jingyang Ridge would I have been able to beat that huge tiger? I need to be soused before I go into action. Then I've strength and spirit, both.”

“I didn't know, brother. We have plenty of good wine at home. I was afraid drinking would slow you down, that's why I didn't dare ask you to drink your fill last night. Since drink only makes you stronger, I'll send a couple

of servants on ahead with some of our best wine and something to eat, and have them wait for us on the road. Then we can indulge at leisure as we travel."

"That's more like it. I'll be primed by the time I fight Jiang the Gate Guard Giant. Without wine, I'd never have the skill. I'll give him such a drubbing for you that everyone who sees will laugh!"

Shi En made the necessary preparations. He told two servants to set out with hampers of wine and food and to take some copper coins. The warden quietly directed twenty stalwart men to trail behind Wu Song to meet any emergency.

Shi En and Wu Song left the Anping Stockade and departed from Mengzhou Town through the East Gate. Before they had gone five hundred paces they saw beside the road a building with a wine pennant sticking out from beneath its eaves. The two servants with the food and wine were already there, waiting. Shi En and Wu Song sat down in the tavern. The servants laid out the tidbits and produced the wine.

"I want a large bowl, not a small. Three portions," said Wu Song.

A servant put a large bowl down in front of him and filled it. With no further ado, Wu Song downed three bowls in succession. The servants collected the crockery and hastened on. Wu Song laughed.

"That just whetted my appetite. Let's go."

They left the tavern. Although the golden autumn breezes had started, it was still the heat of summer, and the two unbuttoned their tunics. After travelling another *li* or so they reached a place that was neither village nor hamlet. But they could see a wine pennant hanging high on a tree. In a grove by the road they found a little shop which sold a simple local brew. Shi En halted.

"They have only rustic grog here. Does this count as a tavern or not?"

“It has a wine pennant, so it comes under the rule of 'Don't pass one without having three.'”

The two men entered and sat down. The servants set out the bowls and tidbits and poured the wine. Wu Song downed three and rose. The servants gathered the utensils and hurried on ahead. Shi En and Wu Song left the inn. Before they had gone two *li* they saw another tavern. Wu Song polished off three bowls and continued on his way.

To make a long story short, he had three bowls at every tavern they encountered. But it seemed to Shi En, even after ten or more stops, that Wu Song was not particularly drunk.

“How much further to Happy Grove?” asked the constable.

“Not much. It's just beyond. Over there in the distance, where those trees are.”

“When we get there, go somewhere and wait. I'll find him myself.”

“Fine. I know just the place. Be careful. Don't underestimate your foe.”

“Never mind. Let the servants go with me. If there are any more taverns, I still want to drink.”

Shi En had the servants accompany Wu Song, and he himself departed.

During the next three or four *li*, Wu Song consumed more than ten bowls of wine. By then it was noon, and very hot, though there was a slight breeze. The warmth from the liquor welled up in Wu Song in a wave. He spread open his tunic. He was only half drunk, but he pretended to be completely intoxicated, and he weaved and staggered. As they neared the grove, one of the servants pointed.

“That's Jiang's tavern at that three-forked crossroads.”

“All right. Keep away and stay out of sight. You can come after I've knocked him down.”

Wu Song skirted around the back of the grove. A big tough fellow wearing a white tunic and holding a fly-whisk was seated in a folding armchair in the shade of a locust tree. Still feigning drunkenness, Wu Song glanced at him.

“That must be Jiang the Gate Guard Giant.”

He plunged on past. After another forty or fifty paces, he could read the pennant on the pole beneath the eaves of the large tavern: *Riverside View.* Attached to a rail, painted bright green, before the door were two gold-spangled banners reading respectively: *In drunkenness the universe is large* and *In the wine pot the days are long.*

A shed on one side of the yard contained a butcher's table, block, knives and skewers. The shed on the other side housed a stove and hamper for steaming buns.

Inside, three great wine vats in a row were half sunk into the earthen floor, and each was more than half full. A young woman sat at an enclosed counter in the middle of the room. She was the concubine Jiang had recently obtained in Mengzhou, where she had been a talented singer of court opera arias of many kinds in the houses of pleasure on the west side of town.

Wu Song observed all this with his drunken eyes, then entered the tavern and sat down opposite the counter. He placed both hands on the table and gazed fixedly at the young woman. When she became conscious of his stare, she turned her head and looked elsewhere.

There were six or seven waiters. Wu Song pounded on the table. “Where is the host?” he shouted.

The head waiter came over. “How much wine would you like, sir?”

“Two drafts. But let me taste a sample, first.”

The waiter told the woman behind the counter to draw two measures of wine. From the bucket she filled he ladled out one bowlful and heated it. He

placed the bowl before Wu Song.

“Here you are, sir. Try this.”

Wu Song sniffed, and shook his head. “No good. Change it.” The waiter saw that he was drunk. He walked over to the counter. “Humor him, mistress, and give him something else.”

The young woman poured back the rejected wine and ladled out some first-quality liquor. Again the waiter heated a bowlful and brought it over. Wu Song tasted it.

“This wine isn't any good either. Change it, quickly, and I'll forgive you.”

Swallowing his anger, the waiter returned to the counter. “Change this again for something better, mistress,” he urged. “There's no use arguing with the likes of him. He's drunk and looking for trouble. Let's give him some top quality.”

The woman ladled out a measure of the best wine. The waiter brought the bucket to the table and heated a bowlful. Wu Song tried it.

“Now this wine has something to it! Tell me, what's the host called?”

“His name is Jiang.”

“Why isn't it Li?”

The woman heard him. “Where did that oaf get so drunk?” she muttered. “Who asked him to come here and get fresh?”

“He's just some stupid rube from the sticks,” said the waiter, “talking a lot of crap!”

“What did you say?” Wu Song demanded.

“We were having a private conversation. Drink your wine, sir, and mind your own business.”

“Waiter, tell that girl behind the counter to come out and have some wine with me.”

“Watch your mouth! She's the host's wife!”

“So what? Drinking with me won't hurt her.”

The young woman was furious. “Coffin bait,” she screamed. “So you want to die!” She pushed open the counter, preparing to charge out.

Wu Song removed his earth-brown tunic and stuffed it into his waistband. Raising the bucket, he sloshed the wine all over the floor. He strode in through the counter, colliding with the girl who was trying to come out. Of course she was no match for him. With one hand he grasped her waist, with the other he seized her hair, mussing her carefully piled coiffure, then lifted her over the counter and tossed the poor girl into one of the open wine vats. She landed with a splash.

Immediately, he emerged again from behind the counter. Several of the more agile waiters rushed him. Wu Song grabbed one and threw him head first into another wine vat. A second he also flung into a vat of wine with one quick move. Two more waiters he downed with a punch and a kick.

With three in the vats unable to climb out, and two on the floor unable to get up, all were farting and pissing in terror. Only one managed to get away.

“The lout is sure to tell Jiang the Gate Guard Giant,” thought Wu Song. “I'll go and meet him halfway! If I beat him up on the road I can let everyone see and give them a good laugh!”

He stepped out briskly. The varlet had indeed hurried to report to the Gate Guard Giant. Jiang was astonished. He kicked over the folding chair, cast aside the fly whisk and lumbered into motion. He met Wu Song on the open road. Although Jiang was big, recent bouts of wine and sex had weakened him, and the news which brought him forward in such a rush had been a severe shock. How could he cope with Wu Song who was as strong as a tiger and determined to best him?

But Jiang was scornful of his foe, thinking that he was drunk, and he closed in rapidly. Quicker than it takes to tell, Wu Song flourished his two fists at Jiang's face, then turned and started away. Enraged, Jiang raced after him. Wu Song lashed out backwards with his left foot and kicked him it the groin. As Jiang clasped his injured section and doubled over in pain, Wu Song whirled around and swung his right foot in a flying kick to the forehead that slammed the big man over on his back. Wu Song planted one foot on his chest and, with keg-like fists, began pommelling Jiang's head.

This maneuver we just described—the flourishing of fists and turning away, the backward left kick, the whirling around and the forward right kick—is called “The Jade-Circle Steps with Duck and Drake Feet.” It was one of Wu Song's most skilful fighting moves. A remarkable trick!

Jiang, on the ground, begged for mercy.

“If you want me to spare you, you must promise me three things.”

“Not three, but three hundred, if you let me live!”

Wu Song pointed at him and made his demands. And as a result: Appearance was changed and a patron was sought, hair was cut in long bangs and a man went forth to kill.

What were the three things Wu Song asked for? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 30
Shi En Three Times Enters the Condemned Cell
Wu Song Goes Wild at Flying-Cloud Ponds

“One,” said Wu Song, “you must leave Happy Grove and return all equipment to its original owner Shi En the Golden-Eyed Tiger Cub. Who told you to take his things?”

“I promise, I promise!” Jiang said hastily.

“Two, I'm going to spare you today, but I want you to round up all the head toughs in Happy Grove and have them apologize for you to Shi En.”

“I promise that, too!”

“After you've turned everything over I want you to leave Happy Grove and go back directly to your native village. You're not allowed to live in Mengzhou Prefecture. If you don't get out, I'll beat you up every time I see you. If I meet you ten times, I'll beat you up ten times! A light job will leave you half dead, a real going over will take your life! Do you promise?”

Jiang wanted very much to live. “Oh, yes, I do,” he cried. “I agree completely!”

Wu Song hauled him to his feet. Jiang's face was black and blue, his mouth swollen, his neck twisted, blood flowed from a cut on his forehead. Wu Song pointed a finger at him.

“To a man who killed the huge tiger on Jingyang Ridge with only three punches and two kicks, what's a scurvy knave like you? Return everything to Shi En and be quick about it! You'll get another drubbing if you dally, and this time I'll finish you!”

Now that he knew his adversary was Wu Song, Jiang could only piteously beg for mercy.

By then Shi En and twenty or thirty stalwart soldiers arrived as reinforcements. But they saw that Jiang was already defeated, and they

surrounded Wu Song delightedly.

“The original owner is here. Move out immediately,” Wu Song directed. “And bring those other proprietors over to apologize, quick!”

“Please come and sit in the tavern, sir,” said Jiang.

Wu Song went with his following. Wine was all over the floor. There wasn't a place you could set your foot. The two varlets were still trying to scramble out of the vats. The woman had just crawlingly emerged. Her face was battered, her soaked skirt was dripping wine. The waiters had long since disappeared.

Wu Song sat down with his party. “Clean this place up,” he shouted.

Jiang got a cart for the woman, loaded on her belongings and sent her off. Then he found a few uninjured waiters and had them ask over the dozen or so other big personages. They all came and apologized to Shi En on his behalf. Jiang brought out his best wine, laid a table, and invited everyone to be seated. Wu Song asked Shi En to sit at the head of the table, above Jiang. A large bowl was placed before each guest, the wine was poured, and all drank several rounds. Wu Song then addressed the gathering.

“Honored neighbors, when I was exiled here after killing certain persons in Yanggu County I heard that this tavern had been taken by force by Jiang the Gate Guard Giant from Shi En, depriving him of his livelihood. You needn't think that Shi En is my master. There is nothing between us. It's just that I have always fought wicked men. If I see injustice on the road, I draw my sword and pitch in, even though it may mean my life! I meant to destroy Jiang today, and rid this place of a plague. But out of consideration for you honorable neighbors I decided to spare the rogue. I have ordered him to leave this district tonight. If he doesn't, the next time I meet him I'll do to him what I did to the tiger on Jingyang Ridge!”

When the guests heard that before them was Constable Wu, the famed tiger-killer, they all rose and apologized for Jiang. “Cool your wrath, gallant constable,” they said. “Let him return the premises to its owner and move out.”

Jiang was too frightened to speak. Shi En checked the equipment, and took over the tavern. Shame-faced, the big fellow thanked all present, loaded his belongings on a cart, and departed. Wu Song plied the neighbors with wine until all of them were drunk. It was late in the evening when they left. He slept right through till the following morning.

On hearing that his son had regained possession of the Happy Grove tavern, the old warden got on his horse and rode to thank Wu Song. He remained several days, drinking in celebration. Everyone in and around the village, learning of Wu Song's prowess, came to pay their respects. The tavern was repaired and went back into operation. The warden returned to Anping Stockade. No one knew where Jiang and his woman had gone, though Shi En sent men out to inquire. He devoted himself to business and thought no more of his former foe. Wu Song remained with him. Profits were from thirty to fifty per cent higher than before. The proprietors of the various other enterprises—the inns, the gambling houses, the money exchange shops—sent Shi En regular contributions, twice as much as before, and he gratefully honored Wu Song like a father. His fall control of Happy Grove was restored. Of that we'll say no more.

Time passed quickly. Soon a month had gone by. The heat gradually lessened, and jade-like dew brought coolness. The golden winds marked the end of summer and the beginning of autumn. To make a long story short, one day Shi En was chatting in the tavern with Wu Song of barehand fighting and staves and spears when three military men arrived at the gate, leading a horse.

They entered and asked the host: “Which one is the tiger-killer, Constable Wu?”

Shi En recognized them. They were adjutants of General Zhang Mengfang who commanded the garrison in Mengzhou Prefecture. Shi En walked up to them and said: “What do you want Constable Wu for?”

“The general has heard of Constable Wu's gallantry and has sent us with a horse to fetch him. Here is His Excellency's invitation.”

Shi En read it. “Zhang is my father's superior,” he thought, “and can give him orders. Wu Song, as an exiled prisoner, is of course also under him. He'd better go.”

To Wu Song he said: “These gentlemen have been sent to fetch you by General Zhang. They've even brought a horse for you. What do you think, brother?”

Wu Song was a straightforward fellow who never beat around the bush. “Since he's sent for me, I'll go,” he replied, “and see what he has to say.”

He changed his clothes and head kerchief, summoned a servant to accompany him, got on the horse and went with his escort to Mengzhou Town. Before the general's residence he dismounted and followed the adjutants into the hall where Zhang was waiting.

The general was cordial. “Bring him here and let me meet him,” he cried.

Wu Song came forward, kowtowed, then stood to a side with his hands clasped courteously.

“I've heard that you're a splendid man, a hero without peer, a fearless fighter who stands by his friends to the death. I need someone like you. Would you be willing to serve under me as an adjutant?”

Wu Song dropped to his knees. “I'm an exile in the prison. If your Excellency is kind enough to raise me, I will gladly be your groom, holding your whip and running by your stirrup!”

Zhang was very pleased. He ordered that tidbits and wine be brought and plied Wu Song with liquor until he was very drunk. Then he had him escorted to rest in a room prepared for him in a wing off the main building.

The next day a man was sent to Shi En's to fetch his things. Thereafter, Wu Song remained in the residence. The general frequently called him to the rear chambers to eat and drink. He was allowed to pass through any room, and was treated like a member of the family. A tailor was summoned to make him autumn clothes, new inside and out.

Wu Song was quite happy. “The general seems keen on advancing me,” he thought. “Ever since I arrived he keeps me by his side every minute. I haven't even had time to go to Happy Grove and see Shi En. Although Shi En sends people to inquire about me, apparently they're not permitted to enter the residence.”

The general was extremely partial to Wu Song. Whenever anyone sought Wu Song's help on some matter, he had only to make a request, and Zhang granted it. People outside sent him gifts of money and silks and satins. He had to buy a box of woven willow to keep them in, all under lock and key. But no need to speak of that.

Soon it was the eighth lunar month. General Zhang laid a feast in the Duck and Drake Bower deep in the rear courtyard to celebrate Mid-Autumn Festival. He invited Wu Song. When Wu Song saw that the general's wife and other female members of the household were present, he drank one cup and turned to leave.

“Where are you going?” the general called.

“With the ladies here, I had better withdraw.”

Zhang laughed. “Nonsense. I respect you as a man of principle and especially invite you to drink with us like a member of the family. Why should you go?” He told Wu Song to sit down.

“I'm just a prisoner. How can I sit at the same table with Your Excellency?”

“Must you act like a stranger? There's no one here but our own people. It's perfectly all right.”

Wu Song made several more polite attempts to leave, but the general wouldn't hear of it. He insisted that Wu Song join them. Finally, apologizing for his presumption, the young man sat, but a good distance from his host, and turned slightly on his chair so that he wouldn't be facing him directly. Zhang instructed the bondmaids to pour wine for Wu Song. After the constable had downed six or seven cups, the general ordered more

fresh tidbits to go with the wine. Then two courses of food were served. Zhang chatted with Wu Song, asking questions about jousting with staves.

“A true man like you shouldn't be drinking from such a small cup,” he said, and shouted: “Bring a big silver flagon for this warrior!”

Zhang's urgings to drink came at Wu Song like a flurry of arrows. He finished several flagons, and by the time the moon was shining in the east windows he was half drunk. Forgetting all courtesy, he continued drinking steadily.

The general ordered a bondmaid called Jade Orchid, of whom he was very fond, to sing a ballad. “There are no outsiders here,” he said. “Only my trusted Constable Wu. Sing us a mid-autumn song about the moon. That's what we'd like to hear.”

Jade Orchid took a pair of ivory clappers, came forward and curtsied to each of the diners. Then she sang a mid-autumn lay by the poet Su Dongpo. It went like this:

When is there a bright moon?

Ask the sky, cup in hand.

Who knows what year it is

In the palaces of heaven.

Long to go there, riding the wind,

But the cold I cannot stand

In that lofty jade firmament;

I dance alone with my shadow,

As if in another world.

With the beaded curtains rolled high,

The moonlight, streaming through the open window,

Drives away sleep.

I should not be resentful, but why

Is the moon always roundest at parting?

As people have their sorrows and joys, separating and reuniting,

So has the moon its bright and dark, waxing and waning.

Since ancient times, it has always been thus!

If we cannot for long be heart to heart,

Let us enjoy the same moon, far apart!

Her song finished, Jade Orchid put down her ivory clappers, again curtsied to each guest, and stood to one side.

“You serve a round, too,” Zhang directed.

The young woman picked up a tray of cups and another bondmaid poured. Jade Orchid presented one to the general, one to his wife, and a third to Wu Song. Zhang ordered that they be filled to the brim. Too embarrassed to raise his head, Wu Song accepted the cup, keeping himself as far from Jade Orchid as possible. He hailed the general and his wife, lifted his cup, drained it, and returned it to the tray.

Zhang pointed at Jade Orchid. “She's quite intelligent,” he said to Wu Song. “Not only does she sing, but she's very good with a needle. If you don't

mind her humble origin, after a time we'll choose an auspicious day and give her to you as a wife.”

Wu Song rose and bowed. “How can a man in my position accept a woman from Your Excellency's household? That would be pushing my luck too far.”

The general laughed. “I've said so, and it must be done. Don't try getting out of it. I won't go back on my promise.”

Wu Song drank another dozen cups, one after the next. Fearing that he might do something discourteous under the influence of liquor, he rose and thanked the general and his wife, then walked through the front hall to his room in the wing. As he opened his door, he could feel the wine stirring within him, and he knew he couldn't sleep. He changed his clothes, removed his head kerchief, took a staff, went into the garden and performed several exercises, whirling the staff above his head. From the look of the sky, it must have been about the third watch.

He returned to his room and was starting to undress when he heard voices in the rear courtyard shouting: “Thief! Thief!” Wu Song said to himself: “The general is so good to me. If there's a thief in his rear yard, I ought to lend a hand!”

He grasped his staff and strode to the rear courtyard. Jade Orchid approached him and said tensely: “A thief has gone into the garden!” Wu Song hurriedly searched among the flowers. He couldn't see a thing. As he was running out again, from the shadows someone threw a stool beneath his feet. He stumbled over it and fell. Six or seven soldiers, yelling “Catch the thief!,” pounced on Wu Song and tied him up.

“It's me!” Wu Song cried in agitation. But the soldiers paid no attention. Lamps sprang to light in the large hall, revealing Zhang seated inside.

“Bring the thief here,” called the general.

The soldiers, beating Wu Song with cudgels, drove him into the hall.

“I'm not a thief,” he cried, “I'm Wu Song.”

The general was furious. His face darkened. “Exile, your crooked heart never changed! I raised you back to respectability, never did you any harm. I even invited you to drink my wine, sit at my table! I was going to make you an official! How could you do such a thing?”

“Excellency, it wasn't me! I came to catch the thief. Why am I being held as the culprit? I have never stolen. I'm an honorable man!”

“You dare to deny it! Take him to his room and search. We'll see whether he has the booty!”

The soldiers took him to his quarters under guard and opened his willow trunk. Beneath some clothes were silver drinking vessels and about two hundred ounces of gold and silver.

Wu Song stared, gaping, and cried out he was wronged. The soldiers carried the trunk to the hall. Zhang examined its contents.

“Shameless exile! Here is the proof. How can you deny it? 'Any animal can be reborn, but the souls of men are difficult to change!' You look like an honest man but you're a habitual criminal! Your guilt is clear, no matter what you say!”

Zhang had the booty sealed, and said: “Keep him in a closed room tonight. We'll deal with the rogue in the morning!”

Wu Song groaned that he was wronged, but who would listen? The soldiers removed the valuables and locked him in a windowless room. That same night Zhang notified the prefect's office and dispensed money among clerks and scribes.

The next morning, as soon as the prefect started court, police and inspectors brought Wu Song before him and produced the booty. A confidant of Zhang's handed the prefect a letter from the general, setting forth how he had been robbed. The prefect ordered the attendants to bind Wu Song and

hold him down. Warders and bailiffs placed the inquisition instruments in front of the prisoner. Before Wu Song could say anything, the prefect spoke.

“A scoundrel under sentence of distant exile, of course you'd turn thief! You saw the chance and couldn't resist. Since the proof is here, there's no point in listening to his lies. Beat him, hard!”

The jailers seized split bamboos and rained blows on the recumbent prisoner. Wu Song knew it was hopeless. He had no choice but to confess: “On the fifteenth of this month I saw many silver flagons in the residence of the general, and my greed was aroused. That night I stole them by guile and took them for myself.”

“This rogue was tempted and he stole,” said the prefect. “No question about it. Put a rack on and take him to prison!”

The jailers affixed a long rack around Wu Song's neck, led him off to the section for the condemned, and locked him in.

“Zhang set this trap to ruin me,” he thought. “If I can remain alive and get out of here. I'll deal with him!”

But his legs were in fetters day and night and his wrists, were enclosed in wooden manacles. He wasn't allowed the slightest freedom.

Shi En had already been informed of what was happening, and he hurried into town to confer with his father. The old warden said: “Commandant Zhang must be behind this, getting revenge for Jiang the Gate Guard Giant. He no doubt paid General Zhang to lay a trap for Wu Song, and bribed high and low to do his bidding. I'm sure he wants to have Wu Song killed. But I've been thinking about this. Wu Song's crime does not call for the death penalty. All we have to do is buy a few clerks and bailiffs and we can protect him while he is in prison. Then we'll see what else we can do.”

“The present bailiff is a man named Kang. We're very good friends,” said Shi En. “Why don't I ask him to help?”

“Wu Song is being persecuted on your account. There's no better time to aid him than right now.”

Shi En went to Kang's house with one hundred ounces of silver, but the bailiff had not yet returned from the prison. A member of Kang's family went to inform him of Shi En's arrival. Kang soon came home and the two friends met. Shi En told him the story in detail.

“I'll be frank with you, brother,” Kang said. “This is all the work of those two pledged blood brothers with the same surname—Commandant Zhang and General Zhang. Jiang the Gate Guard Giant, who is hiding out in the Commandant's house, got him to buy over the general, and they cooked up this scheme together. All the others, high and low, have been bribed by Jiang. Every one of us has received his money. The prefect is bending over backwards to help him. They're surely aiming to have Wu Song killed.

“They haven't been able to do it legally because Clerk Ye does not agree to a death sentence. Ye is an upright and virtuous man who is strongly opposed to ordinary people being harmed. And so, Wu Song still hasn't suffered. Now that I've heard you, brother, I'll look after him in the prison. I'll see to it that he's well treated and not the least abused. Send someone to Clerk Ye quickly to plead with him to prepare the verdict quickly. That's the way to save Wu Song's life.”

Shi En presented Kang with a hundred ounces of silver. The bailiff politely refused several times before finally accepting.

The friends parted and Shi En returned to the prison. He found a man who was close to Ye, and through him sent the clerk a hundred pieces of silver with a plea that he have the charge against Wu Song adjudicated as soon as possible. Ye knew that Wu Song was a chivalrous person. He wanted to aid him, in fact he had already marked the case as open to question. The prefect, having taken General Zhang's bribe, was opposed to leniency.

But burglary was not a capital offence, and so the matter dragged on, and the conspirators decided to have Wu Song killed in prison. Now that Clerk Ye had received the hundred ounces of silver and learned that Wu Song had

been framed, he reduced the charges in the indictment and promised to get sentence passed the moment the preliminary detention period had ended.

The next day Shi En prepared a large quantity of food and wine and asked Kang to take him to Wu Song. They went directly to the big jail where he was incarcerated. Kang was already looking after him, and his restraints had been removed. Shi En, after dispensing twenty or thirty pieces of silver among the lesser keepers, gave Wu Song the food and drink he had brought.

“You've been framed by General Zhang to avenge Jiang the Gate Guard Giant,” he whispered to Wu Song. “But don't worry. I've persuaded Clerk Ye to save you. He'll get you out of here as soon as the preliminary term is up and sentence is passed. Then we'll see.”

With his fetters removed, Wu Song had been thinking of attempting a jailbreak. But Shi En's information caused him to abandon the idea. After reassuring Wu Song, Shi En returned to the stockade.

Two days later, he came again with more food and wine and money, and again Kang led him in. The fare he delivered to Wu Song, the silver he distributed among the keepers. He returned home and sent more largesse to high and low, urging them to hasten the adjudication. On his next visit, again conducted by Bailiff Kang, he brought some clothes, as well as meat and wine, and invited all the keepers to drink, so that they would be good to the prisoner. He asked Wu Song to change into fresh clothes and to partake of the wine and food.

Now that he was familiar with the routine, Shi En visited three times in a few days. He was seen by one of Commandant Zhang's confidants, who reported to his master. The commandant told the general, who sent an emissary with gifts to relay the information to the prefect. This greedy official wanted to be worthy of his bribe, and he dispatched an agent to hang around the prison and question any persons who did not belong there.

When Shi En learned of this, he decided not to risk going again. The bailiff and the keepers continued to look after Wu Song, and Shi En went often to Kang's home to get the news. Of that we'll say no more.

In the nearly two months that followed Clerk Ye made every effort to persuade the prefect. It was thus the official discovered that General Zhang had been given a large amount of silver by the Gate Guard Giant and, in conjunction with Commandant Zhang, had framed Wu Song.

“You've earned a pretty penny,” the prefect thought indignantly, “and you want me to do your dirty work!” He lost his ardor in pursuing the matter.

At the conclusion of sixty days, Wu Song was brought before him, and the shackles removed. Clerk Ye read the indictment defining the crime. The prefect ordered a punishment of twenty blows and exile to the prison in Enzhou. The purloined property was returned to its original owner. General Zhang had no choice but to send a member of his household to bring it back.

Wu Song was beaten twenty strokes and tattooed with “the golden print” of a criminal. A seven-and-a-half-catty rack was affixed around his neck, the necessary documents were drawn, two strong policemen appointed as escorts, and a time of departure designated. The prisoner and his guards set out immediately.

Because the old warden had spent money freely, and Clerk Ye had shown his concern, and the prefect knew he had been framed, Wu Song was beaten lightly. He suppressed his anger and left the town wearing the rack, with the two guards following behind. They had gone about a *li* when Shi En emerged from a tavern along the highway.

“I've been waiting for you, brother,” he said. His head and hand were again bandaged.

“We haven't seen each other in a long time. What's happened to you?”

“The prefect found out about my three visits to the jail, and he stationed a man inside to keep watch. General Zhang had his people patrolling outside the main gate. So I couldn't visit you any more. I could only get news at Bailiff Kang's home. Half a month ago Jiang the Gate Guard Giant returned to Happy Grove with a gang of soldiers. They beat me up and made me bring the neighbors to apologize. Then they took over my tavern and a lot

of equipment. I've been in bed ever since. Today I heard you were exiled to Enzhou and brought these two padded tunics for you to wear on the road. And here is a brace of cooked geese, to eat when you get hungry."

Shi En invited the guards in for drinks, but they refused.

"This lout Wu Song is a crook," they said. "If we drank your wine, tomorrow there'd be all kinds of talk at the prefecture! Get away from us, if you don't want to be beaten!"

Clearly it was no time to argue. Shi En offered the guards ten ounces of silver, but they wouldn't take them. Angrily, they insisted that Wu Song get going. Shi En gave him two bowls of wine and tied a bundle around his waist. The geese he hung on the rack.

"There are two padded tunics in the bundle," he said softly in Wu Song's ear, "and a small packet of silver. You'll need money on the journey. Also two pairs of hemp sandals. Be careful and alert. There knaves are up to no good."

Wu Song nodded. "That goes without saying. I know all about it. I'm not afraid of these two, or two more like them! Go home and rest, and please don't worry. I have some ideas of my own!"

Shi En kowtowed and, weeping, departed. Of that we'll say no more.

The prisoner and his escort proceeded along the highway. Before they had gone several more *li,* one of the guards whispered to his companion: "Any sign of the other two?"

Wu Song heard, and laughed coldly to himself. "So there are more of you rogues coming to get tough! Don't celebrate too friggin soon!"

His right hand was locked in the rack, but his left was free, and with this he began eating one of the geese. He paid no heed to the guards. He finished the first goose by the time they had walked four or five *li,* then went to work on the second, holding it with his right hand and dismembering it with his left. Another five *li* and that goose, too, was completely consumed.

When they were still about eight or nine *li* from their destination, two men appeared on the road ahead, waiting with halberds and swords. They joined the prisoner and his escort and walked along with them. Wu Song observed his guards exchange significant glances with the newcomers. He was eight-tenths sure of what was impending, but he kept his own counsel and pretended to have seen nothing.

A bit further on, they came to an area of many fish ponds linked by streams and rivers. As the five men began crossing a wide-planked bridge, they passed an arch on which a placard read: “Flying-Cloud Ponds.”

“What's the name of this place?” Wu Song deliberately asked.

“You're not blind,” said the guards. “Can't you see the sign?”

Wu Song halted. “I have to take a piss.” The two with the halberds started closing in on him. “Down you go,” he cried. He lashed out with a leg and kicked one of them tumbling into the water below. The other was hastily turning when a kick from Wu Song's right foot sent him splashing to join his mate. The two guards fled the bridge in panic.

“Where do you think you're going,” Wu Song roared. He wrenched open the rack and tore it in two, and raced after his quarry. One of them collapsed in fright. Wu Song caught up with the second and slammed him to the ground with a punch in the back. From the water he retrieved a halberd. A few stabs and the fellow expired. He then finished the other terror-paralyzed guard in the same way.

The two he had kicked into the stream had just struggled out and were starting to flee. Wu Song gave chase. He hacked one to the ground and seized the other.

“Tell the truth and live!”

“We two are apprentices of Jiang the Gate Guard Giant. He and Commandant Zhang told us to join forces with the guards and murder you!”

“Where is your master now?”

“When I left he was in the Duck and Drake Bower in the rear courtyard, drinking with the Commandant and the General. He's waiting for us to return and report!”

“So that's how it is. In that case I can't spare you!”

Wu Song's hand rose and his blade descended. He killed the man, removed his sword, selected the best of his victims' blades for himself, and rolled the bodies into a pond. To make sure the guards were dead, he pierced them both again a few times with a halberd. Then he stood on the bridge and surveyed the carnage.

“Although I've finished these four varlets,” he thought, “my hatred won't be appeased until I've killed General Zhang, Commandant Zhang and Jiang the Gate Guard Giant!”

Halberd in hand, he pondered silently. He made up his mind. He was going back to Mengzhou Town.

And as a result, Wu Song destroyed greedy men and could breathe once more. Truly, the ornate hall was carpeted with corpses, the red festive candles shone on blood-steeped floors.

What, then, ensued when Wu Song returned to Mengzhou? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 31
General Zhang's Blood Spatters the Duck and Drake Bower
Pilgrim Wu Song at Night Travels Centipede Ridge

It was already dusk when he entered the town. Wu Song went straight to a stableyard abutting the wall of General Zhang's rear garden and there concealed himself. The groom was still in the residence and had not yet returned.

Soon, a door near the corner of the wall squeaked open. The groom emerged, carrying a lantern. Someone inside the residence closed the door.

Hidden in the shadows, Wu Song heard the watchman's drum. It was the fourth interval of the first watch. The groom fed the horses, hung up the lantern, spread his bedding, undressed and went to bed. Wu Song made a noise outside the stable door.

“I've just retired,” shouted the groom. “You're too early if you've come to steal my clothes!”

Wu Song leaned his halberd beside the door, held the sword in his hand, and rattled the door. This was too much for the groom. He leaped naked from his bed, grabbed a pole, pulled the bolt and started to open the door. Wu Song barged in with a rush and seized him. The groom opened his mouth to yell, but the sight of the sword gleaming in the lamplight turned his bones to beancurd.

“Spare me,” he pleaded weakly.

“Do you know me?” Wu Song demanded.

The groom recognized his voice. “Brother,” he said, “this has nothing to do with me! Spare my life!”

“Then tell the truth! Where is General Zhang?”

“With Commandant Zhang and Jiang the Gate Guard Giant. The three of them have been drinking all day in the Duck and Drake Bower.”

“Is that the truth?”

“May I die of boils if I'm lying!”

“In that case I can't spare you!” With one stab Wu Song killed the groom. He kicked the body aside and slipped the sword back into its sheath.

From the bundle around his waist he took the clothes Shi En had given him, changed into them, bound them tightly, and tucked the sheathed sword into his sash. He wrapped his loose silver in a coverlet from the groom's bed, thrust the bundle into his bag, and hung the bag next to the stable entry. He removed one of the double stable doors from its socket, leaned it against the

garden wall, went back in to blow out the lamp, then came out again. Grasping his halberd, he clambered up the door to the top of the wall.

There was a faint moon. Wu Song leaped down into the garden, opened the small door in the wall, went out and returned the stable door to its original position, re-entered the garden and closed the wall door, but left it unlatched.

In a nearby building a lamp was gleaming. It was the kitchen. Two maids were complaining as they heated a kettle of hot water.

“We've been waiting on them all day, and still they don't go to bed,” one of them was saying. “They keep wanting tea! And those two guests are so drunk they ought to be ashamed! But instead of coming down and resting, they just talk and talk and talk!”

Wu Song leaned his halberd against the building, pulled out his bloody sword, pushed open the creaking door, and rushed in. He grabbed one of the girls by the hair and killed her with a single stab. The other wanted to flee, but her feet seemed nailed to the floor. Though she opened her mouth to scream, no sound came out. She was paralyzed with terror (Even I, the teller of this tale—to say nothing of a girl—would have been too scared to utter a peep!) Wu Song thrust with his sword and killed her.

He dragged the bodies over beside the stove and blew out the kitchen lamp. In the light of the moon, he crossed stealthily over to the main hall. As a man who had free access to every quarter of the residence, he knew his way, and proceeded quickly to the Duck and Drake Bower. On tiptoe, he mounted the stairs.

By then the attendants were weary and annoyed, and had gone off elsewhere. Wu Song could hear the voices of General Zhang, Commandant Zhang and Jiang the Gate Guard Giant. At the head of the stairs he listened. Jiang was praising the general.

“I'm very grateful, Your Excellency, for helping me get revenge. I must show my thanks further, in a substantial manner.”

“I would never have done such a thing if it weren't for the sake of my dear friend Commandant Zhang. Although it's cost you a bit of money, all the arrangements have been nicely made. It must be over by this time. The wretch probably is dead. I told the guards to finish him at the Flying-Cloud Ponds. We'll know definitely when the four come back in the morning.”

“Four against one,” said the commandant. “A cinch! Even if he had more lives than a cat, he'd have lost them all!”

“I told my apprentices to strike at the ponds, too,” said Jiang, “and to report back as soon as the deed was done.”

A raging flame in Wu Song's heart spurted up madly and pierced the black sky. His right hand tightened around the sword, the fingers of his left hand spread rigid. He burst into the room. Five large flowery candles and moonlight streaming in through two windows gave plenty of illumination. A wine pitcher and flagons had not yet been removed.

Jiang, seated in an armchair, was so startled at the sudden appearance of Wu Song that his heart flew into the clouds. Quicker than it takes to say, as the big man was scrambling to his feet, the sword carved his face with such force that the chair split and overturned. Wu Song whirled, blade in hand, as General Zhang started to move. Wu Song swung, gashing his neck just below the ear. The general fell heavily to the floor. Both victims struggled for life.

Commandant Zhang was a trained military man. Although drunk, he was no weakling. When he saw the other two go down, he knew there was no escape. He picked up an armchair and raised it above his head. Wu Song stepped in to meet the charge, and pushed. Even sober, Zhang would have been no match for the mighty strength of Wu Song. He fell on his back. Wu Song bounded forward, and with one sweep of the sword cutoff his head.

The powerful Jiang was straining to rise. Wu Song's left foot lashed out and kicked him over. Holding him down, Wu Song decapitated him, turned, and did the same to General Zhang. On the table there was still meat and wine. Wu Song seized a flagon and drained it, then had three more. He cut a strip

from the clothes of one of the dead men, dipped it in blood and wrote large on the white calcimined wall:

“The slayer is Wu Song the tiger-killer!”

He stamped the silver flagons flat and placed them inside his tunic. As he started to leave, he heard the voice of the general's wife, on the floor below, say to some servants: “Those gentlemen are all drunk. Go up, a couple of you, and help them down.”

Two men began mounting the stairs. Wu Song hid and waited. They were attendants of the general, and both had taken part in seizing Wu Song the day before. He let them come up, then slipped around behind them and cut off their escape. When they entered the room and saw the three bodies lying in pools of blood, they were stricken dumb, and stared at each other in alarm. It was as if the domes of their skull had been opened in eight parts and half a bucket of icy snow poured in.

As they turned to flee, Wu Song felled one with a stab in the back. The other dropped to his knees and begged for mercy. “I can't spare you!” said Wu Song. He grabbed the man and thrust. Blood drenched the ornate chamber. Lamplight flickered over the strewn bodies.

“I might as well do this thoroughly,” thought Wu Song. “Even I kill a hundred, I can only be executed once!” Holding his sword, he went down the stairs.

“What was all that racket about, up there?” the general's wife called.

Wu Song went quickly to the front of the building. “Who's that?” she wondered when she saw the big fellow come out. His sword slashed her forehead, and she fell, screaming. He held her down and tried to remove her head, but the blunted sword wouldn't cut. Wu Song looked at it in the moonlight.

“No wonder!” He went to the kitchen, got his halberd, threw the sword away, and returned to the building. There was Jade Orchid, the maid who had sung to him, leading two children. She saw her mistress lying dead, and

cried out in dismay. Wu Song ran his halberd through her heart. The two children he similarly dispatched. One thrust each was enough.

From there he traversed the central hall, and bolted the main gate of the residence. He came back, found two or three more women, and killed them too, all speared to the ground.

“I'm satisfied, at last,” he said to himself. “Now I can go!”

He discarded the sword sheath and left through the door in the rear wall with his halberd. In the stableyard he retrieved his rucksack, put the flattened silver flagons inside and tied the bag around his waist. Then he set out, halberd in hand.

At the town wall he thought: “If I wait till dawn when they open the gates, I'll be taken. I've got to get over the wall and leave while it's still dark.” He clambered to the top. Mengzhou Town was a small place, and its crude wall was not very high. From the ramparts Wu Song probed down with the shaft of his halberd till the end touched the ground, then he leaned and vaulted to earth.

He landed beside the moat. He could see in the moonlight that the water was only a foot or so deep. Since it was the middle of the tenth lunar month, most springs were dry. Wu Song removed his shoes and stockings and knee-length leg-wrappings, tucked up his clothing, and waded across. He remembered the hemp sandals Shi En had given him, took them out of his bag and put them on.

He heard the watchman's drum beat in the town. It was the third interval of the fourth watch. “Today I got that dirty rage out of my system,” he thought. “This is no place for me to hang around!” With his halberd, he marched east along a party. By the fifth watch, the darkness was fading, but it was not yet fully light.

It had been a hard night, and he was weary, the wounds from his beating were painful. He couldn't go on. He saw, nestled in a grove, a small ancient temple. Wu Song entered, leaned his halberd and removed his bag. Using the bundle for a pillow, he stretched out.

He was just closing his eyes when two long hooked poles snaked forward and pinned him down. Two other men ran in, seized and tied him.

“The rascal is nice and fat,” said the four knaves. “Big brother will be pleased!”

Wu Song struggled in vain. They took his bundle and halberd and hauled him like a sheep, hustling him along so fast that his feet scarcely touched the ground. They headed for a village.

On the way, they discussed him. “Where did he get that blood all over him? Robbing someone?” Wu Song remained silent, and let them talk. After travelling four or five *li*, they came to a thatched building. They pushed him in. A lamp was gleaming through the small doorway of a side room. The four stripped him and tied him to a pillar.

Wu Song observed two human legs hanging from a rafter near the stove. “I've fallen into the hands of evil assassins,” he muttered. “I'll die here and no one will know! If I thought this was going to happen, I would have given myself up at Mengzhou! There I'd be executed with one hack of the blade, but I'd leave a clean name to posterity!”

The four had his bundle. “Brother, sister-in-law, come quickly,” they called. “We've got a fine piece of merchandise here!”

“I'll be right with you,” a voice replied. “Don't do anything without me. I'll do the carving myself.”

In less time than it takes to drink a cup of tea, a woman, followed by a big man, entered the room. They stared at Wu Song.

“Isn't that brother-in-law?” the woman exclaimed.

“Sure enough, it's my brother!” cried the man.

Wu Song looked. The man was none other than Zhang Qing the Vegetable Gardener, and the woman was Sun the Witch. The four varlets, astonished, untied Wu Song and returned his clothes. His head kerchief had been torn to

shreds, so they gave him a broad-brimmed felt hat instead. It seemed that Zhang Qing had several places of business in addition to the one at Crossroads Rise. Wu Song hadn't known.

Zhang Qing invited him into the front parlor, and courtesies were exchanged. The host was shocked at his appearance.

“Whatever happened to you, brother?”

Wu Song told the whole story—from his beating of Jiang the Gate Guard Giant, to his frame-up by Jiang, Commandant Zhang and General Zhang, his terrible revenge against them all, to his final capture by the four in the temple.

The four ruffians dropped to their knees and kowtowed. “We are Brother Zhang Qing's men,” they said. “The last several days we lost at gambling, and we went into the grove hoping to pick up a little business. We saw you come along the path, all spattered with blood, and go into the temple to rest. We didn't know who you were. Recently, Brother Zhang Qing has instructed us: 'Bring them back alive.' So we took you with hooks. Otherwise we might have killed you. Truly, 'We had eyes but didn't recognize Mount Taishan!' In our blunder, we knocked you about. Brother, forgive us!”

Zhang and his wife laughed. “We told them to bring in only live merchandise because we were worried. Of course they had no idea what we were thinking. If you weren't tired, brother, forty men couldn't have taken you, to say nothing of these four oafs!”

The four fervently kowtowed. Wu Song told them to get up. “Since you have no money for gambling,” he said, “I'll give you some.” He opened his bundle and dispensed ten pieces of silver. They thanked him profusely. Zhang Qing added another two or three ounces of his own, and the four left to divide the money.

“You don't know how concerned I've been, brother,” said Zhang Qing. “After you left I was afraid you'd run into trouble, that sooner or later you'd return. So I told those louts: 'I want only live merchandise.' The slower ones

they catch live all right, but the ones they can't subdue they used to kill. Now I don't let them carry knives when they go out. They can only use hooks and trip ropes. When they called me just now, I had a strange feeling, so I ordered them to wait for me. Who would have thought it was you, brother!”

Sun the Witch said: “When word got round that you beat up Jiang the Gate Guard Giant, and that you were drunk when you did it, there wasn't a traveller who wasn't amazed. We heard about it from merchants who do business in Happy Grove. We didn't know what happened afterwards. You're tired, brother. Please go to the guest-room and rest. We'll talk about what to do later.”

Zhang led Wu Song to the guest-room, where he lay down and slept. Husband and wife went into the kitchen and prepared fine delicacies and excellent wine to serve Wu Song when he got up. Soon all was in readiness.

Not until the fifth watch did those who had concealed themselves in General Zhang's residence in Mengzhou Town dare to emerge. Their cries and lamentations roused servants and attendants, and brought in the military guards stationed outside. At the sight which confronted them, all raised a terrible clamor. The neighbors stayed fearfully at home.

As soon as it was light, the matter was reported to the Mengzhou authorities. The startled prefect immediately dispatched men to examine and count the bodies, determine how the murderer had entered and fled, and produce a drawing of the scene of the crimes, with specifications.

On their return they gave this report: “He entered through the stableyard, where he killed the groom and left two pieces of old clothes. He killed two maid servants in the kitchen by the stove. Beside the kitchen door was one of the murder weapons—a blunted sword. Upstairs he killed General Zhang and two of his attendants. In addition two guests—Commandant Zhang and Jiang the Gate Guard Giant —were also killed. On the white wall he wrote in blood: 'The slayer is Wu Song the tiger-killer!' Downstairs he stabbed to death the general's wife, Jade Orchid, two nursemaids, and three children. The total number of bodies is fifteen. He also stole six gold and silver drinking flagons.”

The prefect ordered that all four gates of the town wall be closed and that soldiers, police and ward chiefs make a house-to-house search for the criminal Wu Song. The following day officials arrived from the Flying-Cloud Ponds section.

“We have discovered four bodies in the water,” the local ward chiefs stated. “There are bloodstains from the murder beside the bridge.” They handed in a formal written report.

On the prefect's order, the local county sheriff was sent to investigate, and to pull out and examine the bodies. Two were policemen from the county office. Their families encoffined them for burial and brought formal complaints before the prefect urging that the culprit be caught and made to pay with his life.

For three days the town gates were kept closed, and every house was visited, but in vain. The prefect issued documents ordering all subdivisions under the district's jurisdiction to join in the search. The details of Wu Song's place of birth, age and appearance, together with a drawing of his likeness, were circulated, and three thousand strings of cash offered for his capture. Anyone who could report his whereabouts would be rewarded. Anyone who concealed and sheltered him would be considered guilty to the same degree as the criminal. The notice was also sent to neighboring districts and prefectures.

We'll speak now of Wu Song, who rested in Zhang Qing's home four or five days. The search for him was like a fine-toothed comb, with much hue and cry. Police swept through every village and hamlet. When Zhang Qing learned of this, he talked to Wu Song.

“It's not that I'm afraid for myself to keep you here,” he said. “But the police are going from door to door, very hot. If anything should go wrong, you'd have only me and my wife to blame. I know of a good refuge for you. I've mentioned it before. The question is would you be willing to go?”

“I've been considering, too. Trouble is bound to come. It's not safe here. I had an elder brother, but my sister-in-law murdered him. I've only recently come to Mengzhou, but I've already been framed for a crime. I have no

home and no relations. If you know of a safe place, why wouldn't I go? Where is it?”

“It's in Qingzhou Prefecture—Precious Pearl Monastery on Two-Dragon Mountain. Brother Sagacious Lu the Tattooed Monk and a bold fellow called Yang Zhi the Blue-Faced Beast have turned robbers there. They control that territory. The Qingzhou army and police don't dare even glance in their direction. It's the best refuge for you. Anywhere else, you'd be caught sooner or later. Lu keeps writing and urging me to join him. But I'm very fond of this place, so I haven't gone. I'll write a letter telling him all about you. He'll surely accept you, for my sake.”

“You're right, brother. I've been thinking of joining them myself. Only the time never seemed right, or the chance propitious. But now, since I've killed people, and the chase is closing in, and I've no other place to hide, it's an excellent idea. Give me a letter to take along, and I'll leave today.”

Zhang Qing got paper and wrote a detailed introduction, which he handed to Wu Song, then began preparing a farewell feast. His wife shook her finger at him reprovingly.

“How can you let brother-in-law go off like this? He's sure to be taken!”

“What do you mean, sister-in-law?” queried Wu Song.

“There are notices out everywhere, offering a reward of three thousand strings of cash, with your picture and all about you. There are two golden prints plainly on your face. If you're stopped on the road, you'll never be able to deny it!”

“Cover them with a couple of plasters,” suggested Zhang.

His wife smiled scornfully.

“Aren't you the clever one, speaking such nonsense! Would that fool any policeman? I have a proposal, but maybe brother-in-law won't agree.”

“Why not? I'm fleeing from disaster.”

Sun the Witch laughed. “I hope you won't think this is too crazy.”

“I'll do it, no matter what.”

“Two years ago, I knocked off a monk who came here. We stuffed our dumplings with him for several days. He left a metal hoop which had bound his long hair, a set of clothes, a black robe, a multi-colored short sash, a monk's certificate, a rosary of a hundred and eight pate-bones, and a shark-skin sheath containing a pair of fine steel knives embossed with a snowflake pattern. The blades often groan in the night. You've seen them, brother-in-law. Today, you're on the run. We'll cut your hair in long bangs like a pilgrim monk and cover the tattoos on your face. You'll carry the certificate as identification. His age and appearance were similar. Fate has been kind. Use his name on the road, and no one will presume to question you closely. How does that strike you?”

Her husband clapped his hands together. “She's right! I'd forgotten all about him. Brother, what do you say?”

“Sounds all right to me. But I'm afraid I don't look much like a man who's renounced the material world.”

“We'll fix you up,” said Zhang.

His wife went into another room and returned with a bundle. She opened it and took out some clothing. She told Wu Song to change all his garments, both inner and outer. He examined the monk's vestments.

“They seem to have been made for me!” He put on the robe, tied the sash, removed the broad-brimmed felt hat, let his hair down, folded the ends up, put the metal hoop on, and hung on the rosary.

Zhang Qing and Sun the Witch gazed in admiration. “This must have been ordained in a previous existence!”

Wu Song looked in the mirror and burst out laughing.

“What's so funny?” asked Zhang.

“I can't help it. Me, a pilgrim monk! All right, brother, cut my hair.”

With a scissors, Zhang trimmed his hair, front and back. Since time was short, Wu Song packed his bundle and got ready to go.

“Listen to me, brother,” Zhang said. “Don't think I'm trying to gain anything by this, but you'd better leave General Zhang's drinking vessels here. I'll give you silver coins instead, which you can carry on the road. It will be safer.”

“You're very far-sighted, brother.” Wu Song gave him all the flattened flagons and received in exchange a bag of silver pieces. This he put in his purse which he tied inside his sash.

They wined and dined together, then Wu Song bade Zhang and his wife farewell. He hung the pair of knives at his waist. It was evening, and all was in readiness. Sun the Witch had sewn him an embroidered bag for the certificate and told him to wear it inside, next to his chest, Zhang offered some final words of advice.

“Be careful on the road. Don't get into any scrapes. Go easy on the drinking. Don't quarrel with anyone. In other words, act like a monk. Nothing's worth getting excited about. You don't want people to see through you. When you get to Two-Dragon Mountain, write and let me know. My wife and I won't be here much longer. One of these days we'll pack up and join you fellows on the mountain. Take care of yourself, brother. Give our respects to Lu and Yang.”

As he left the gate, Wu Song hitched up his sleeves and rocked off with stately pace. Zhang and his wife watched after him approvingly.

“The very picture of a pilgrim monk!”

Leaving the big tree at Crossroads Rise, Wu Song set forth. It was the tenth lunar month. The days were short. Before he knew it, it was dark. After travelling less than fifty *li* he saw a high rise before him. With a bright moon to light his way, he climbed to the top. He estimated the time to be about the first watch. On the crest of the hill he halted and looked around.

The moon, rising in the east, clearly illuminated every shrub and blade of grass. He heard laughter in the grove ahead.

“Strange,” he thought. “Who could be laughing on this quiet height?”

He entered the grove. Amid the pines was a cemetery temple—a thatched structure of ten or so rooms. He pushed open a small pair of windows and peered inside. A Taoist priest was embracing a girl by the window on the other side, laughing and fooling around while gazing at the moon.

Anger rose in Wu Song's heart, bile seethed in his gall. “Here is a priest withdrawn to the wooded hills, and he plays these kinds of games!” He pulled the pair of steel knives from his waist and looked at them, gleaming silvery in the moonlight. “They're fine blades,” he thought, “but they haven't done a lick of business for me yet. I'll test their metal on that scoundrel!”

He hung one knife from his wrist, returned the other to its scabbard, slipped his arms out of his robe, wrapped the sleeves around his waist and tied them behind, then went to the front of the temple and knocked on the door. At this, the priest closed and locked the rear window. Wu Song picked up a stone and pounded on the portal, hard. A side door opened and an acolyte emerged.

“Who are you?” the boy yelled. “How dare you come in the middle of the night and make such a racket! What are you banging on our door for?”

Wu Song glared. “I'll dedicate my knife with this friggin acolyte, first!” he shouted. He slashed, and there was a thud as the boy's head departed from his neck and hit the ground.

From within the temple the priest roared: “Who dares to slaughter my acolyte!” He came bounding out, a sword in each hand, and rushed at Wu Song.

“Lucky I don't keep my skill locked away in my trunk,” Wu Song laughed. “This really scratches me where I itch!” He drew the other knife from the sheath and, whirling the pair, advanced to meet the priest.

Back and forth, to and fro, the two battled in the moonlight, encased in swirls of icy vapor. More than ten rounds they fought, and the clash of their arms rang upon the heights.

One of the two was doomed to die. In the chill glow and dim shadows a head would roll. In the murderous encounter blood would rain.

Which of the two fell in this battle to the death? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 32
Pilgrim Wu, Drunk, Pummels Kong Liang
Elegant Tiger Chivalrously Frees Song Jiang

Pilgrim Wu pretended to leave an opening, and the priest dashed in with his two swords. Wu Song whirled, aimed and slashed. The priest's head went rolling off to one side, his body dropped on the stone flagging.

“That girl in the temple, come out,” Wu Song shouted. “I won't kill you! I only want to question you!”

The girl emerged, knelt before him and kowtowed.

“No need for that. Just tell me: What's the name of this place? What was that priest to you?”

“I'm a daughter of the Squire Zhang family at the foot of the hill. This is our ancestral cemetery temple. The priest came one day and spent the night at our house. No one knew where he was from, but he claimed to be able to tell fortunes and practise geomancy. My parents didn't want to keep him in our home, so they asked him to study the geomantic conditions in the cemetery. He sweet-talked them into letting him stay on a few days. Then he saw me, and wouldn't leave. He lived in our house for two or three months. He killed my father and mother and brother and sister-in-law, and forced me to come up to this temple with him. The acolyte was a boy he had also kidnapped, from some other village. This place is known as Centipede Hill. The priest, whose name was Wang, thought it a propitious spot, so he called himself the Flying Centipede.”

“Don't you have any relatives?”

“Several families of them. But they're all farmers. Not one dared stand up to him.”

“Did the knave have any property?”

“He'd accumulated about two hundred ounces of silver and gold.”

“Go get it, quickly. I'm going to burn down the temple.”

“Wouldn't you like some food and wine, sir?”

“Yes, if you've got any.”

“Please come into the temple, then.”

“You wouldn't have anyone else hidden there, waiting to do me in?”

“How many heads have I got to lose, that I'd dare try to trick you?”

Wu Song followed the girl into the temple. By the small window was a table with wine and meat. He filled a large bowl and drank. The girl collected the priest's gold and silver. Wu Song set fire to the temple. She handed him the money.

“It's yours. I don't want it,” he said. “You'll need it to live on. Now get out of here, quick! Go on, go!”

The girl kowtowed and thanked him, and went down the hill. Wu Song threw the two bodies into the flames, and sheathed his knives. That same night he crossed the hill and travelled a winding road to the prefecture of Qingzhou.

For another dozen or so days he walked. Sure enough, in every town, village and hamlet were posters calling for the apprehension of Wu Song. But seeing him in his guise as a pilgrim monk, no one thought to question him.

It was the eleventh lunar month, and the weather was cold. Though he stopped frequently for food and drink, Wu Song was chilled through. As the road climbed to the top of a hill, he saw ahead a high craggy mountain. He went down the hill and walked on for another four or five *li.* A tavern stood by a clear stream. Behind it loomed a hill of tumbled boulders. The tavern was just a small country wine shop. Wu Song went in and sat down.

“Host,” he called, “two measures of wine. You can bring some meat, too.”

“We have some simple home brew, Reverend,” said the tavern keeper, “but I'm afraid we're out of meat.”

“Bring the wine, then. It will ward off the cold.”

The host drew two measures and served Wu Song in a large bowl. He brought also a side dish of vegetables. Wu Song soon finished the wine and called for another two drafts. Again the host served, in a large bowl, and Wu Song continued drinking. He was already half drunk from his tippling on the way. Now with four more drafts, consumed quickly, and having been fanned by the wind, he could feel the wine rising to his head.

“Don't you really have anything to eat in this place?” he bawled to the tavern keeper. “Then sell me some of the meat you keep for yourself! I'll pay. I've got silver!”

The host laughed. “I've never seen a monk like you. Drinking wine and eating meat without a qualm. Where am I going to get you meat? Forget it, Reverend.”

“I'm paying for what I get. Why won't you sell me any?”

“I told you. We've only got this white wine. We don't have anything else.”

While they were arguing, a big fellow and three or four companions came in. The host greeted them, all smiles and bows.

“Please be seated, Second Young Master,” he said.

“Have you prepared everything as ordered?” asked the big fellow.

“The chicken and meat are cooked and ready, just waiting for you.”

“And my flowery-jug wine?”

“It's here.”

The man and his companions walked to a table opposite Wu Song and sat down. The host brought wine in a flowery jug, opened the clay stopper, and poured the wine into a large white basin. Wu Song could see that it was a vintage brew, fresh from cellar storage. Its bouquet wafted to his nostrils. The fragrance was almost unbearable. Wu Song's throat tickled. He could scarcely restrain himself from rushing over and grabbing.

Now the host went to the kitchen and returned with a tray bearing two cooked chickens and a platter of boiled meat. He placed these before the man he called Second Young Master, along with vegetable dishes, then proceeded to ladle out wine for heating.

Pilgrim Wu looked at his lone dish of vegetables, and he flushed with anger. It was a case of “satiated eyes and starving stomach.” The wine was working in him. He wanted to pound that other table to smithereens!

“Come here, host,” he roared. “What do you mean by cheating your customers!”

The tavern keeper hurried over. “Don't lose your temper, Reverend. If you want more wine, just say so.”

Wu Song glared. “Surly oaf! Why wouldn't you sell me flowery-jug wine and chicken and meat? I pay silver for everything.”

“The wine and chickens and meat come from that gentleman's home. He's only using my place to cook and eat them.”

Wu Song's craving blinded him to reason. “Farts, farts!” he bawled. “You're a stinking liar!”

“I never saw a monk behave like such a savage!”

“What's savage about me? This buck has paid for everything you've served!”

“And I've never met a monk who calls himself 'this buck'!”

Wu Song jumped up and fetched him a slap in the face that knocked him rolling to the other side of the room. Half the host's face was swollen, and it took him some time to crawl to his feet. Angrily, Second Young Master rose swiftly and shook his finger at Wu Song.

“Where's your sense of fitness, you friggin monk! Punching and kicking! Haven't you ever heard that 'He who renounces the material world leaves passions behind'!”

“So I hit him! What business is that of yours?”

“I offer you friendly advice, and you dare to get tough!”

Wu Song pushed his table aside and strode forward. “Are you talking about me?”

The big fellow laughed. “You want to fight me, friggin monk? That's putting your head in the tiger's mouth!” He beckoned. “Come outside, dirty pilgrim! I'll talk to you there!”

“You think I'm afraid?” Wu Song shouted. “That I don't dare fight?” He rushed to the door. The big fellow strode out, and Wu Song followed.

Eyeing Wu Song's bulk, Second Young Master was wary. He struck a defensive pose and waited.

The pilgrim monk stepped up and grasped his hands. The man strained to throw him. By what could he do against such enormous strength? With a twist, Wu Song pulled him against his chest. Then with a thrust he flipped him to the ground as easily as turning over a baby. The big fellow hadn't been able to raise a finger in his own defence.

The three or four village men who were his companions watched, trembling, not daring to come to his aid. Wu Song planted one foot on his

recumbent foe and pounded him with twenty or thirty blows of the fist where it hurt, then lifted him up and heaved him into the stream. The companions exclaimed in dismay. Confusedly, they waded in and hauled him out. Supporting him, they made off in a southerly direction. The host, his face paralyzed from the slap, could scarcely walk. He went and hid himself in a rear room.

“So you're all gone! Fine,” said Wu Song. “Now I can do some eating and drinking!”

He scooped a bowlful of wine from the large white basin. The pair of chickens and the platter of meat had not been touched. He tucked in with both hands, and in half a watch he had polished off eight-tenths of the food and wine.

Drunk and satiated, the sleeves of his robe tied behind his back, he left the tavern and followed a path by the stream. He staggered and blundered along, buffeted by the north wind. About five *li* from the tavern a yellow dog came out from behind an earthen wall and started barking at him. Wu Song was drunk and quarrelsome. How dare that yellow cur trail after him and bark?

With his left hand he pulled out one of his knives and gave chase. The dog yapped at him from the bank. Wu Song thrust and missed. The force of his charge sent him plunging into the stream. He was so drunk he couldn't rise. The yellow cur stood and barked.

It was mid-winter. Although there were only two or three feet of water in the stream, it was icy cold. At last Wu Song managed to crawl out, dripping wet. He saw his knife, glittering in the water where he had dropped it. He squatted to pick it up, and tumbled in again. This time he couldn't find his feet. He lay in the stream, rolling helplessly.

From around a screen wall on the bank a gang of men emerged, led by a big strapping fellow. He wore a broad-brimmed felt hat and a padded tunic of gosling yellow. In his hand was a staff. The dozen or so men behind him all carried wooden rakes and cudgels. They heard the dog barking. One of them pointed at Wu Song.

“That varlet of a pilgrim in the stream is the one who beat up Second Young Master! He couldn't find you, Elder Brother, so he went back to the tavern with twenty or thirty vassals to nab him! But the lout's right here!”

Before the man had finished speaking, the younger brother Wu Song drubbed was seen approaching in the distance. He had changed his clothes and was carrying a halberd. Behind him were twenty or thirty vassals, armed with spears and staves, whistling fiercely as they searched. When they reached the screen wall they discovered Wu Song.

“There's the oaf who pounded me, brother!” the young fellow said to the man in gosling yellow.

“Take him to the manor and give him a good going over!” the elder brother directed.

“Get him!” shouted the younger man.

Thirty or forty fellows charged into the water. Poor Wu Song, drunk, was no match for them. He hastily tried to get up. But they all pounced on him and dragged him by his heels from the stream. They hustled him around the wall on the bank. There stood a large manor, enclosed by high whitewashed walls. Surrounding the grounds were weeping willows and tall pines.

The men pushed him into the manor, stripped him, took his knives and bundle, and tied him to a big willow. “Get some vines and flay the wretch,” they cried.

They had hit him four or five times when a man emerged from the manor house. “Who are you brothers beating there?” he queried.

The two big fellows clasped their hands together respectfully. The elder said: “Today, Teacher, younger brother went with three or four neighbor friends to that tavern on the path ahead for a few drinks. This scoundrel of a pilgrim picked a quarrel, beat up younger brother and threw him in the stream. His face and head were cut and battered. If his friends hadn't hauled him out he might have frozen to death. He came home, changed his clothes, got some men and went hunting for the churl. That dirty pilgrim had

finished off all the meat and wine, and was soused to the ears. He collapsed in the stream outside our front gate. We've brought him here to beat him. He's obviously not a real monk. There are two criminal tattoos on his face that he's covered with his hair. He must be an escaped prisoner on the run. We'll get the truth out of the scoundrel and turn him over to the authorities!"

"What's the use of questioning him," exclaimed the younger brother who'd been pummeled. "That rascal has hurt me all over. I'll be lucky if I can leave my bed in two months. Beat the rogue to death, I say, and incinerate him! That's the only way I'll be able to breathe freely again!"

He raised the vines.

"Wait a moment, young brother," said the man they called "Teacher."

"Let me take a look at him. He seems like a brave fellow."

Wu Song was beginning to sober up. He knew what was going on, but he kept his eyes closed. He let himself be beaten without uttering any sound. The man examined his back.

"Strange," he mused. "Those look like recent marks of the stripes a prisoner is given on discharge." He came around to the front of the captive, grasped his hair and pulled his head up. "But this is my brother, Wu the Second!" he cried.

Wu Song opened his eyes and gazed him. "Brother!" he exclaimed.

"Untie him, quickly," the man shouted. "He's my brother!"

The man in the gosling yellow tunic and the young fellow who had been trounced were startled. "This pilgrim is Teacher's brother?" they asked.

"He's the one I've so often told you about—Wu Song who killed the tiger on Jingyang Ridge. How did he become a wandering monk?"

The two brothers hastily unbound Wu Song. They gave him dry clothing and helped him into the manor hall. Wu Song started to drop to his knees and kowtow. Surprised and happy, the man stopped him.

“You're not quite sober yet, brother. Sit a while and talk.”

Wu Song was overjoyed to see him. The effects of the wine were soon half gone. Hot water was brought to that he could wash and rinse his mouth, and he was given a potion to sober him up. Then he kowtowed.

The man he greeted was none other than Song Jiang, known as the Timely Rain, of Yuncheng City.

“I thought you were at Lord Chai's manor,” said Wu Song. “What are you doing here? I'm not seeing you in a dream?”

“After you left, I remained there for half a year. I was afraid my father would be worried, so I sent my brother Song Qing home. Later I received a letter from them saying that, thanks to the efforts of Constables Zhu and Lei, no more pressure was being put on the family, but that I was still wanted and there were notices out for my arrest. The search, however, was not very intense. Squire Kong, of this manor, several times sent an emissary to my home to inquire about me. He met Song Qing who told him that I was at the manor of Lord Chai. So Squire Kong dispatched a man to bring me here. This section is called White Tiger Mountain, and the manor belongs to Squire Kong. The young fellow you fought is his youngest son. Because he's hot-tempered and belligerent he's known as Kong Liang the Flaming Star. The one in the gosling yellow tunic is the squire's eldest son. His name is Kong Ming, and he's called the Comet. Both are fond of spears and staves, and I've taught them a bit, so they call me 'Teacher'. I've lived here half a year now. These last few days I've been thinking of going to Fort Clear Winds. I was just about to leave. While I was still at Lord Chai's I heard how you killed the tiger on Jingyang Ridge, and that you were made a constable in Yanggu County, and later killed Ximen Qing in a fight and were exiled. But where, I didn't know. How did you become a pilgrim monk, brother?”

“After parting with you at Lord Chai's manor I killed the tiger of Jingyang Ridge and delivered it to Yanggu County town. The magistrate made me a constable. Later, my shameless sister-in-law took Ximen Qing for a lover and poisoned my brother. I killed them both and surrendered myself to the

magistrate. He turned me over to Dongping Prefecture. The prefect was lenient and exiled me to Mengzhou....”

Wu Song went on to tell of his meeting with Zhang Qing and his wife at Crossroads Rise, how he met Shi En, and fought Jiang the Gate Guard Giant, and killed General Zhang and fourteen others, how he returned to the home of Zhang Qing, why Sun the Witch disguised him as a wandering monk, how on Centipede Hill he tried out his knives on Wang the priest, how he got drunk in the village tavern and beat up the younger Kong.... He told Song Jiang the whole story in detail.

The Kong brothers listened in amazement. They dropped to the floor and kowtowed. Wu Song quickly returned the courtesy. “I'm afraid I roughed you up a bit,” he apologized. “Forgive me.”

“'We had eyes but didn't recognize Mount Taishan!' It's we who need to be forgiven!”

“Since you are so kind, please have my certificate and letter and luggage dried. And don't lose my two knives and that rosary.”

“You needn't worry, sir,” Kong Ming replied. “I've already instructed people to attend to it. As soon as everything is in order your belongings will be restored to you.”

Wu Song thanked him. At Song Jiang's request, Squire Kong came out and met Wu Song. The old man spread a feast in his honor. Of that we'll say no more.

That night Song Jiang asked Wu Song to share his room, and they talked long of all that transpired during the previous year. Song Jiang was very pleased. The next morning Wu Song rose at daybreak, washed and rinsed, went to the central hall and had breakfast. Kong Ming kept him company, Kong Liang, in spite of his aches and pains, also attended him. The squire ordered that sheep and pigs be slaughtered and another feast prepared.

Several neighbors and relatives came from the village to pay their respects that day, as did several retainers of the Kong family. Song Jiang was glad to

see his friend so honored. After the banquet was over and the guests had departed, he spoke to Wu Song.

“Where are you planning to settle?”

“As I told you last night, brother, Zhang Qing the Vegetable Gardener has written a letter of introduction so that I can join the band of Sagacious Lu the Tattooed Monk in the Precious Pearl Monastery on Two-Dragon Mountain. He's going there himself, later.”

“Good. I recently received a letter from home saying that Hua Rong, Commandant of Fort Clear Winds, has heard that I killed Mistress Yan, and has been sending messages urging me to spend some time with him. The fort isn't far from here, and I'd been meaning to go, but bad weather has held me back. Why don't we go together?”

“I'm afraid that's not a good idea, brother. I've committed such serious crimes that even a general amnesty wouldn't clear me. That's why I've decided to become a bandit on Two-Dragon Mountain. Besides, I'm disguised as monk now. Travelling together would be awkward. People might get suspicious. There could be trouble, and you'd be implicated. I know we're brothers to the death, but it might involve Commandant Hua Rong as well, and that would be bad. I'd better just go to Two-Dragon Mountain and be done with it. If Heaven pities me, and I don't die, and I receive a pardon, there'll still be time for me to seek you out again.”

“As long as you haven't lost your desire to serve the emperor, Heaven will surely protect you! Since you've made up your mind, I won't try to dissuade you. But stay here with me a few days, first.”

The two remained at Squire Kong's manor for ten days or more, then announced that they were setting forth. The old squire wouldn't hear of it. He kept them another four or five days, but Song Jiang was determined, and he had no choice but to give them a farewell feast.

The next morning Wu Song was presented with a newly made pilgrim's robe. His certificate, letter, head hoop, rosary, knives and gold and silver were all returned. He and Song Jiang were each given in addition fifty

ounces of silver to spend on the road. Song Jiang tried to refuse, but the squire and his sons forceably put the money into their bundles.

Now Song Jiang's garments and weapons were in order. Wu Song was wearing his pilgrim's garb, with the hoop on his head and rosary around his neck, the knives in their sheaths. He collected his bundle and tied it to his waist.

Song Jiang took up his halberd, hooked on his sword, donned his wide-brimmed felt hat and bid farewell to Squire Kong. The two sons directed vassals to carry the luggage. They themselves saw the guests off more than twenty *li* down the road before taking their leave.

Shouldering his pack, Song Jiang said: “There's no need for these vassals to accompany us any farther. Brother Wu Song and I will go on from here.”

The Kong brothers bid them farewell, and returned to the manor with the vassals. Of that we'll say no more.

Song Jiang and Wu Song chatted as they walked, and at evening they rested for the night. They rose early the next morning, made breakfast, then marched forty or fifty *li* till they came to a market town called Lucky Dragon. Here the road forked, and Song Jiang asked one of the inhabitants: “Which way to Two-Dragon Mountain, and Fort Clear Winds?”

“Those are two different directions. The west road will take you to Two-Dragon Mountain. If you want to get to the Fort, you have to take the east road and cross Clear Winds Mountain.”

Song Jiang turned to Wu Song. “Brother, we part here. Let's have three farewell cups, first.”

“I'll accompany you down the road a piece.”

“No, don't. 'Though you see a friend off a thousand *li*, sooner or later you must part.' Just concentrate on your own long journey ahead. Get there as

soon as possible. After you've joined the band, go easy on the drinking. If the imperial court pardons you, urge Sagacious Lu and Yang Zhi to surrender, too. Some day you may be sent to fight along the frontier. You'll earn honors for your future wife and children, and leave behind a good name when you die. You won't have lived in vain. I myself am a man of no talents. Though I'm loyal to the emperor, I cannot advance. But you, brother, who are so courageous, will surely do big things. Don't forget your stupid brother's words. I hope we shall meet again."

Wu Song listened carefully. They downed several cups in a tavern, paid, left the tavern and proceeded to the fork in the road at the end of the town. Wu Song kowtowed four times. There were tears in Song Jiang's eyes.

"Remember what I've told you, brother," he exhorted. "Don't drink too much. Take care of yourself!"

Wu Song strode off along the western road. Reader, please note: He was heading for Sagacious Lu and Yang Zhi, to join their band on Two-Dragon Mountain. Of that we'll say no more.

Song Jiang took the eastern road to Clear Winds Mountain. Wu Song was still in his thoughts. After travelling for several days, he saw a high mountain in the distance. It was oddly shaped, and thickly covered with trees. Song Jiang gazed at it appreciatively a long time. Then, anxious to cover ground, he pushed on steadily, without bothering to seek a resting place.

Before he realized it darkness began closing in, and he looked around in alarm. "If it was summer," he thought, "I could sleep in a grove. But it's mid-winter, with chill winds and frost. The night will be very cold. And there may be ferocious beasts, tigers and leopards. If I can't cope with them, I'm liable to lose my life!"

He continued east along the road for about a watch, growing more and more worried. He couldn't see, and stumbled over a trip-cord. Immediately, a bell tinkled among the trees. Fourteen or fifteen robbers, who had been lying in ambush, came yelling out. They seized Song Jiang and bound him, taking his halberd and bundle. Lighting torches, they escorted him up the

mountain. He could only bemoan his fate. Before long, they reached the stronghold.

In the light of fires Song Jiang could see a log palisade enclosure, in the middle of which was a main hall. Here stood three armchairs draped with tiger skins. Behind this building were a hundred or so thatched huts. The robbers trussed Song Jiang up like a dumpling and tied him to a pillar.

“The big chieftain has just retired,” said one of the robbers on service in the hall. “Don't report to him now. When he sleeps off his drinks, we'll ask him to come, and give him a broth of the heart and liver of this ox to sober him up! And we'll all be able to eat fresh meat!”

“What rotten luck,” thought Song Jiang. “To have to suffer a fate like this just because I killed a painted hussy! I never dreamed I'd leave my bones here!”

The robbers lit lamps and candles, illuminating the room. Song Jiang was frozen stiff, but he couldn't move. He stared around, then lowered his head and sighed.

About the third watch, four or five robbers emerged from the rear of the hall. “The big chieftain is up,” they announced, and turned the lamps still brighter. Song Jiang stole a glance at the man who appeared. On his head was a turban, bound in place by a red silk ribbon. He wore a date-red padded tunic. He seated himself in the middle armchair.

This bold fellow was from Laizhou Prefecture, Shandong Province. His name was Yan Shun and he was known as the Elegant Tiger. Originally, he had been a dealer in sheep and horses. But he went broke, and took to the greenwood and became a bandit.

Now, seated in the middle armchair, he was completely sober.

“Where did you get this ox, boys?” he asked.

“We were lying in ambush behind the mountain when we heard the bell ringing in the grove,” they replied. “This ox, travelling alone with a bundle

on his back, had stumbled over our trip-cord. We brought him here for your sobering-up broth."

"Fine. Invite the other two chiefs to join me."

The robbers went and soon returned from the side of the hall with two audacious men. The one on the left was short, with burning eyes. He came from the Huaihe River valley and his name was Wang Ying. He was known in the gallant fraternity as the Stumpy Tiger. A carter by trade, he had been unable to resist temptation on the road, and had robbed a merchant. He escaped from prison after his arrest and fled to Clear Winds Mountain. He and Yan Shun took the mountain over when they turned bandit.

The man on the right had a clean fair complexion, and his face was adorned with a mustache and a goatee. He was tall, slim, broad-shouldered, and handsome. His head was bound with red silk. He came from Suzhou, and his name was Zheng Tianshou, But because of his good looks he was known as the Fair-Faced Gentleman. He had been a silversmith and since childhood, had been very fond of spears and staves. Eventually, he drifted into the gallant fraternity. While passing Clear Winds Mountain he met and fought the Stumpy Tiger fifty or sixty rounds, with neither able to best the other. Yan, impressed by his skill, invited him to join them as third in command.

All three chieftains took their seats. "Let's get started, boys." Wang the Stumpy Tiger urged. "Cut out this ox's heart and liver and cook us three portions of sour and peppery sobering-up broth!"

A robber brought a large bronze basin filled with water and set it down in front of Song Jiang. Another robber, rolling up his sleeves, held a shiny pointed carving knife. The first robber scooped up water with his hands and splashed it on Song Jiang's chest. Cold water drives the hot blood away, so that the heart and liver, when removed, are crisp and tasty.

The robber then flung some water in Song Jiang's face. The captive sighed. "What a pity that Song Jiang should die here!"

Yan Shun heard him. “Stop!” he shouted to the robbers. “Did that fellow say something about 'Song Jiang'?”

“He said: 'What a pity that Song Jiang should die here.'”

Yan rose from his chair. “You fellow. Do you know Song Jiang?”

“I am Song Jiang.”

Yan came closer. “Which Song Jiang are you?”

“From Jizhou Prefecture. I was clerk of the Yuncheng County magistracy.”

“Not Song Jiang the Timely Rain from Shandong Province? The one who killed Mistress Yan and fled, Song Jiang of the gallant fraternity?”

“Yes. But how did you know?”

Astonished, Yan grabbed the knife from the robber and cut Song Jiang's bonds, then draped over his shoulders his own date-red padded tunic, carried him to the middle chair and carefully sat him down. He shouted to Wang and Zheng, and all three knelt and kowtowed. Song Jiang hastily returned the courtesy.

“Not only don't you kill me, but you treat me with such decorum! What's the meaning of this?”

The three remained kneeling. “I ought to gouge my eyes out with that knife,” cried Yan. “Imagine not recognizing a good man! If I hadn't seen you, if I'd asked a few less questions, I might have finished a noble warrior! Heaven was good and fortunately you spoke your great name, or I'd never have known! In the ten years and more I've been in the greenwood I've often heard chivalrous men tell how just and generous you are, helping those with hardships, saving those in danger. I cursed my luck that I never had a chance to pay my respects. Today, Heaven has let us meet. I'm happy with all my heart!”

“What virtue or ability have I, to deserve such kindness?”

“You're considerate and kind to men of talent, a companion of courageous men, you're famed far and wide! Who wouldn't admire you? The stronghold in Liangshan Marsh is flourishing. Everyone has heard. People say it's due mainly to you. Why do you come here, and alone?”

Song Jiang told how he rescued Chao Gai, killed Mistress Yan, how he lived with Lord Chai and Squire Kong for a long time, and why today he was seeking Hua Rong at Fort Clear Winds. The three chieftains listened delightedly. They presented him with clothes, ordered the slaughter of sheep and horses, and gave him a feast that very night. They ate until the fifth watch, when attendant robbers helped Song Jiang to bed.

The next morning he rose early and related his adventures on the road. He told too of how heroic Wu Song was. Slapping their thighs regretfully, the three leaders said: “We have no luck! It would be fine if he came here. Too bad he's gone to that other place!”

But enough of idle chatter. Song Jiang stayed six or seven days on the mountain, and they wined and dined him every day. Of that we'll say no more.

It was the beginning of the last lunar month, a time when Shandong people visit their family graves. A robber scout came up the mountain and reported: “There's a sedan-chair on the road, with seven or eight men behind carrying two boxes. They're on their way to a cemetery to burn paper ingots.”

Stumpy Tiger was a lecherous fellow. A sedan-chair was almost sure to have a woman in it. He assembled forty or fifty men to go with him down the mountain. Neither Song Jiang nor Yan Shun could stop him. Flourishing spears and swords, off went the gang, beating brass gongs. Song Jiang and the remaining two chieftains sat drinking in the stronghold.

Stumpy Tiger was gone two or three watches. A far-ranging scout returned and said: “Chieftain Wang caught up with the party on the road. The seven or eight soldier escorts ran away. He captured the woman in the sedan-chair. The only thing of value was a silver incense burner.”

“Where has he taken the woman?” asked Yan.

“To his house on the rear of the mountain.”

Yan laughed.

“So brother Wang lusts after women,” said Song Jiang. “That's not how a bold man should behave!”

“In everything else, he's quite forward-looking, but he does have this failing,” Yan admitted.

“Both of you come with me while I speak with him.”

Yan and Zheng followed Song Jiang to Wang's place on the rear slope of the mountain. They pushed open the door. Stumpy Tiger had his arms around a woman and was pleading with her. He thrust her aside when he saw the three men enter, and invited them to be seated.

Song Jiang turned to the woman. “In whose household are you, madam? What is it that brings you out wandering idly around in times like these? Anything important?”

The woman advanced shyly and curtsied to each of the three. “I am the wife of the Commandant of Fort Clear Winds. This is the first anniversary of my mother's death. I was on my way to burn paper money at her grave. I would never dare to wander idly around. I beg you, great chieftain, save my life!”

Song Jiang was astonished. He thought: “But I'm on my way to join the commandant of the fort. Can she be Hua Rong's wife? How can I save her?”

“Why hasn't your husband Commandant Hua Rong gone together with you to the cemetery?” he asked.

“Commandant Hua Rong is not my husband.”

“Didn't you just say you're the lady of the Commandant of Fort Clear Winds?”

“The fort has two commandants—a civil and a military. Hua Rong is the military commandant. My husband, Liu Gao, is the civil commandant.”

“Her husband is Hua Rong's colleague,” Song Jiang thought. “If I don't rescue her, it will look bad when I get there.”

To Stumpy Tiger, he said: “I have a suggestion. I wonder whether you'd be willing to accept it?”

“I'll hear anything you have to say, brother.”

“In the gallant fraternity, anyone who 'wastes his marrow' is a joke. This woman is an entitled lady by decree of the imperial court. For me and gallantry's sake, let her return to her husband. What do you say?”

“Listen to me, brother, I've never had my own woman here in the stronghold. Those big-hat officials are the cause of all the trouble in this world. Why should you care about her husband? Indulge me in this, brother.”

Song Jiang dropped to his knees. “If it's a wife you want, I'll get you a fine one. I'll pay for the wedding and give you a girl who'll serve you well. But this woman is the wife of an official who is a colleague of a friend of mine. You must let her go as an expression of goodwill.”

Yan and Zheng helped Song Jiang to his feet. “Please get up, brother. There's no problem,” they assured him.

“In that case, I sincerely thank you.”

It was obvious to Yan Shun that Song Jiang was determined to save the woman. Heedless of the wishes of Stumpy Tiger, Yan shouted for the sedan-chair bearers. The woman kowtowed to Song Jiang worshipfully.

“Thank you, great chieftain,” she cried.

“Don't thank me, lady,” he replied. “I'm not a chieftain here. I'm just a traveller from Yuncheng County.”

The woman left the stronghold, carried by the two bearers. Their lives spared, the men flew down the slope, regretting only that they hadn't been born with two more legs each!

Stumpy Tiger Wang maintained an embarrassed, morose silence. Song Jiang pulled him to the front hall and said: “Don't be upset, brother. Come what may I'm going to get you a bride who will give you joy. I'm a man of my word.”

Yan and Zheng laughed. Wang was annoyed, but he couldn't very well show it. Song Jiang had him tied up by the code of chivalry. He smiled politely and accompanied Song Jiang to the center of the stronghold, where a feast was laid. Of that we'll say no more.

When the soldiers escorting the sedan-chair had its occupant snatched from them, they returned to Fort Clear Winds and reported to Commandant Liu: “Your lady has been kidnapped by the bandits on Clear Winds Mountain!”

“Idiots! You abandoned her!” Liu lambasted them with a big cudgel.

“There were only half a dozen of us, and thirty or forty of them! What chance did we have?”

“Bullshit! If you don't get her back, I'll have every one of you thrown into prison!”

There was no way out. The escort pleaded for another seventy or eighty soldiers, armed them with spears and staves, and set forth. When they had covered half the distance, they saw the sedan-chair racing towards them.

“How were you able to get away?” they asked Commandant Liu's wife.

“When I told them who I was, they were scared stiff! They kowtowed and told the bearers to bring me back.”

“Lady, have mercy on us! Tell the commandant we fought and rescued you. Otherwise, we'll all be beaten!”

“I know what to say, never fear.”

The soldiers thanked her and formed an escort around the sedan-chair. On the return trip, they were impressed by the speed of the bearers.

“When you two carry a chair in town, you waddle along like ducks,” they said. “What makes you so fast today?”

“We're really pretty tired, but those knuckle-raps on the back of the skull drive us forward.”

The soldiers laughed. “You must be seeing ghosts. There's nobody behind you.”

Only then did the bearers turn around. “Aiya!” they exclaimed. “We were running with such gusto we were drumming the backs of our heads with our own heels!”

The soldiers roared. They convoyed the sedan-chair into the fort. Commandant Liu was delighted.

“Who was responsible for your rescue?” he asked his wife.

“After those scoundrels seized me, I wouldn't succumb to their wiles, and they were going to kill me. But when I said I was the commandant's lady, they were afraid to touch me, and hastily kowtowed. Then our men came and fought and brought me home.”

Liu rewarded the seventy or eighty soldiers with ten bottles of wine and a large pig. Of that we'll say no more.

Song Jiang remained in the mountain stronghold another six or seven days. But he was anxious to join Hua Rong, the military commandant. The three chieftains could not persuade him to stay. They gave him a farewell feast and presented him with gold and other valuables, which he put into his pack.

The morning of his departure he rose early, washed and rinsed, had breakfast, tied on his belongings, and said goodbye to the three chieftains. Carrying wine and tidbits, they insisted on seeing him off for twenty or more *li* down the slope. When they reached the highway, they filled the cups for a final toast. The chieftains hated to let him go.

“You must come and stay with us on your way back from the fort!”

Song Jiang shouldered his pack and took up his halberd. “We'll meet again,” he assured them. He bid the chieftains a courteous farewell.

If it were I, the teller of this story, living in those days, I would have grabbed him around the waist and pulled him back to the stronghold by force! Anything to prevent him from joining Hua Rong! He nearly died without even having a place for burial!

Truly, the bumpy roads we travel are all part of Heaven's plan. Can the gales and storms we encounter be sheer accident, then?

Whom did Song Jiang meet after joining Commandant Hua Rong? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 33
Song Jiang at Night Views the Hill of Lanterns
Hua Rong Turns Topsy-turvey Clear Winds Fort

Clear Winds Mountain was not far from Qingzhou, a hundred *li* or so. The fort was located in Clear Winds Town, because here the road divided into three forks leading to three bandit-controlled mountains. The town, inhabited by four or five thousand households, was separated from Clear Winds Mountain by a ride of only a stage or more.

That day the three bandit chieftains returned to their mountain lair, and Song Jiang travelled on alone, his pack upon his back, following the winding road to Clear Winds Town. There he asked for Hua Rong's residence.

“Headquarters of the fort is in the center of town,” said his informant. “Civilian Commandant Liu lives in a small enclosure to the south, Military Commandant Hua lives in a small enclosure to the north.”

Song Jiang thanked the man and proceeded to the northern enclosure. Guards standing at the gate asked him his name, then went in to report. Soon a young officer came out. He enthusiastically hauled Song Jiang inside, while shouting for the guards to carry his pack and halberd and sword, and led him to the main hall where he invited him to be seated on a cool bamboo couch. He dropped to his knees, kowtowed four times, then rose.

“I've thought of you often in the five or six years since we parted, brother,” he said. “I heard that you killed your tramp of a mistress. There were notices out for your arrest all over. I was on pins and needles. I must have written a dozen letters to your manor, inquiring. Did you ever receive them? Today Heaven is kind, and we're able to meet again. I never felt so relieved in my life!”

Once more Hua Rong kowtowed. Song Jiang raised him to his feet. “Don't be so courteous, brother. Please sit down, and I'll tell you the rest of my story.”

Hua Rong seated himself respectfully slightly at a bias, and Song Jiang related in detail how he killed Mistress Yan, took refuge with Lord Chai, met Wu Song at Squire Kong's manor, and of his capture at Clear Winds Mountain and his encounter with Yan Shun.

“You've had your share of troubles, brother,” said Hua Rong. “How fortunate that you could come here now. Stay a few years and then we'll see.”

“If my brother Song Qing hadn't written urging me to go to Squire Kong's manor I would have called on you sooner.”

Hua Rong asked Song Jiang to the rear hall and summoned his wife to pay her respects, and then his younger sister. He supplied his guest with a

change of garments and shoes and stockings, and a bath of fragrant water, after which he laid a feast of welcome.

During the meal Song Jiang told how he rescued the wife of Commandant Liu. Hua Rong frowned.

“What did you do that for? It would have been a good chance to shut her mouth permanently!”

“You amaze me! I thought I was doing something for the sake of your colleague. And I had to offend Wang the Stumpy Tiger and practically force him to let the woman go. I don't follow you.”

“I don't mean to gossip, brother, but Clear Winds Fort defends a vital area of Qingzhou Prefecture. If I were in sole command here, the bandits wouldn't be so free with their raids, I can tell you! But this greedy, contemptible Liu has been made my superior. He's only a civilian official, and he has no ability besides. He's been squeezing the rural property-holders from the day he took office. He has no respect for the law. There's nothing he won't do. I'm the military commandant, but I'm under him. He makes me furious. I'd like to kill the dirty beast! Why did you have to save the rascal's wife! She's a nasty piece of business, always egging him on to evil deeds, encouraging him to harm people, to be hungry for bribes. What if she suffered insults and humiliation? Brother, you saved a bad woman!”

“No, that's wrong. You know the old saying: 'The knot of hatred should be opened, not tightened.' He's your colleague. Although he has shortcomings, you should overlook his faults and praise his virtues. You mustn't be so narrow-minded.”

“You see things very clearly, brother. When I meet him in the office tomorrow I'll tell him how you rescued his wife.”

“Behaving in this manner will be a manifestation of your own merits.”

All day Hua Rong and his wife and family wined and dined Song Jiang. In the evening they prepared a bed and canopy for him in a room off the rear hall, for his night's rest. The next day they again served him sumptuous

meals. To be brief, it went on like this for four or five days. Hua Rong directed several of his most trusted men—a different one each day—to show Song Jiang around the bustling market section of the town, and the temples and monasteries in the outskirts. He gave them money for expenses.

In the market section there were a few small brothels and tea-houses and wine shops, needless to say. Song Jiang and his guide wandered idly through the brothels, then went to the suburbs to look at a Taoist temple, after which they returned to a wine shop in town and drank. The guide tried to pay, but Song Jiang insisted on footing the bill. He said nothing about this to Hua Rong. His guide was very pleased. He was able to pocket the expense money, and had a pleasant time to boot. Song Jiang followed the same procedure with each of the other guides, always paying his own way. He was, as a result, well-liked in the fort.

A month went by. Winter was drawing to a close and the new year commencing. Soon it was Lantern Festival time.

The town residents talked over how they would celebrate it. They all chipped in, went to the King of Earth Temple and erected in front of it a framework of a turtle-shaped hill on which they hung six or seven hundred colored lanterns, and topped it all off with bunting and streamers. In the temple courtyard, there were various games. People also built trellises and suspended pretty lanterns in front of their homes. In the market section of town every shop had its own entertainments and amusements. While not as lavishly celebrated as in the capital, the festival to the local people seemed like heaven on earth.

On the fifteenth of the first lunar month—Lantern Festival Day, Song Jiang was drinking with Hua Rong in the fort. The weather was clear and fine. Around mid-morning Hua Rong got on his horse, rode down to headquarters and mustered several hundred soldiers. He instructed them to go into town that evening and keep order. He also selected a roster to guard the gates of the fort.

Early in the afternoon he returned and asked Song Jiang to lunch.

“I hear there's a lantern display in town tonight,” said Song Jiang. “I'd like to see it.”

“I wish I could go with you. But I'm too busy. I can't get away. There will be two or three attendants to keep you company, though. Come home early. I'll be waiting here to celebrate the festival with you with a few cups of wine.”

“Fine.”

As the day drew to a close, a round bright moon floated up from the east. Song Jiang strolled out with three attendants. In town he saw the fancy lanterns hanging from lattices in front of every door. Many showed story pictures. Some were cut-outs of lovely flowers—white peony, hibiscus, lotus.

Holding hands to keep together in the crowds Song Jiang and his escort went to the King of Earth Temple and admired the hill of lanterns, then walked south along a winding street. After proceeding six or seven hundred paces they saw ahead a bevy of glowing lanterns and a throng of merry-makers before the gate of a high-walled compound. Gongs brayed, music tootled, people cheered. They were watching a troupe of dancers in comic masks.

Song Jiang was short and couldn't see over the heads of the crowd. The attendants knew some of the performers, and they pushed a path through the onlookers to give Song Jiang an unobstructed view. The chief comic did an exaggerated imitation of a rustic's walk, and Song Jiang roared with laughter.

Inside the open gate, Civilian Commandant Liu, his wife and several other women were observing the show. When Liu's wife heard Song Jiang laugh, she looked and recognized him in the light of the lanterns. She pointed him out to her husband.

“That short swarthy fellow laughing there is one of the bandit chieftains on Clear Winds Mountain who kidnapped me!”

Startled, Liu shouted to six or seven of his guards to grab the short dark man who was laughing. Song Jiang heard him and quickly left. But before he had passed a dozen houses, the soldiers caught up, seized him, pulled him into the compound, tied him up, and took him into the hall. When the three men who had been escorting Song Jiang saw that he was arrested, they ran back to inform Hua Rong.

Commandant Liu, seated in his hall, ordered that the prisoner be brought forward. The guards swarmed up with Song Jiang and forced him to kneel.

“You're a Clear Winds Mountain thieving robber! How dare you come here to see the lanterns?” barked Liu. “Now that you're caught, what have you got to say for yourself?”

“My name is Zhang San. I'm a merchant from Yuncheng County, an old friend of Commandant Hua Rong. I arrived here only a few days ago. I've never been a robber on Clear Winds Mountain.”

Liu's wife came out from behind a screen. “You're lying,” she shrilled. “Don't you remember you insisted I call you 'chieftain'?”

“You're mistaken, madam. I told you that I was a merchant from Yuncheng, that I had also been seized by the bandits and couldn't leave the mountain.”

“In that case what are you doing here, looking at lanterns?” Liu demanded.

“Up there you sat on the middle chair as big as life,” the woman insisted. “Even when I called you big chieftain you paid no attention to my pleas!”

“How can you have forgotten, madam? I rescued you, and made them let you go! Yet now you say I'm a brigand!”

The woman pointed at Song Jiang in a rage. “If you don't give these crooked types a good drubbing they never admit anything!”

“Absolutely right,” said Liu. “Get split bamboos and beat this knave,” he shouted.

Song Jiang was flailed severely in two storms of blows. Blood flowed from his lacerated flesh.

“Chain him,” Liu directed, “and tomorrow put him in a cage cart! We'll send this 'Yuncheng Tiger' Zhang San to the prefecture for disposition!”

Hua Rong was shocked when Song Jiang's escort rushed back and reported. He hastily penned a missive which he dispatched to Liu with two of his trusted officers. They waited at the gate of Liu's compound while the sentry went in and announced: “Two men from Commandant Hua with a letter.”

Liu directed that they be brought in. The couriers handed him the message. He tore open the envelope and read:

Hua Rong respectfully greets his colleague and brother: A poor relation of mine, Liu Zhang who came recently from Jizhou, while viewing the lanterns unintentionally offended Your Excellency. I beg you to restrain your wrath and release him. I will be extremely grateful. Please forgive my clumsy writing.

Liu Gao angrily tore the letter to shreds. “That Hua Rong is too discourteous! He's an appointee of the imperial court. How can he consort with bandits, and try to pull the wool over my eyes! The knave of a prisoner says he's Zhang San from Yuncheng County. Hua Rong says he's Liu Zhang from Jizhou. He needn't think he can beguile me! Just because he says the man's name is Liu—the same as mine—does he imagine I'll let him go?”

The commandant ordered that the messengers be thrown out. They were hustled through the compound gate, and immediately returned to Hua Rong and reported.

“My poor brother Song Jiang!” Hua Rong exclaimed. “Get my horse ready immediately!” He donned his armor, tied on his bow and quiver of arrows,

grasped his spear, and mounted. With forty or fifty men, bearing spear, and staves, he set out directly for Liu Gao's compound.

The guards at the gate didn't dare stop them. At the sight of Hua Rong's forbidding visage they took fright and fled. Hua Rong rode up to the main hall, dismounted, and stood, spear in hand, his soldiers arrayed behind him.

“Commandant Liu, please come out,” he called. “I have something to say to you!”

Liu was terrified. Hua Rong was a military man. He didn't dare face him. When Liu still failed to emerge after several minutes, Hua Rong thought a moment, then ordered his men to search the compound's wings. They made a quick sweep and found Song Jiang in a side room. He was in chains and suspended by a rope from a rafter. His legs were torn and lacerated from his beating. The soldiers cut him down, broke off the shackles, and carried him out. Hua Rong ordered them to take him home.

He got on his horse, spear in hand. “Commandant Liu,” he cried. “Though you're the senior officer here, you have no right to treat me like this! Who doesn't have relatives? How dare you seize a cousin of mine, drag him into your residence, and label him a brigand? You've gone too far! I'll settle with you later!”

Leading his soldiers, he returned to his own enclosure to look after Song Jiang.

Liu promptly mustered two hundred men and ordered them to go to Hua Rong's and bring Song Jiang back. Among these were two captains. Although skilled in arms, they were no match for Hua Rong. But they could not disobey Liu Gao. And so they marched with their company to Hua Rong's enclosure. The soldiers at the gate reported their arrival. It was still early in the morning. The two hundred men stood gathered outside the gate, not daring to enter. They all were afraid of Hua Rong.

When the day was fully light, the large double doors swung open, revealing Commandant Hua Rong seated inside his hall, a bow in his left hand, an

arrow in his right. Liu's men crowded towards the gateway. Hua Rong raised his bow.

“You men,” he shouted, “don't you know that 'the culprit must pay for his wrong, and the debtor for his debt'? Liu Gao has sent you here. Don't risk your necks for him! You two captains are new. You haven't seen my skill. I'm going to give demonstration of now to use a bow and arrow. Then any of you who want to show your mettle for Liu Gao, come ahead, if you have the nerve! My first shot will be at the knobbed cudgel of the painted door god on the left.”

He fitted the arrow, stretched his bow and, with a yell, let fly. The arrow slammed into the knob of the cudgel. The two hundred men were amazed. Hua Rong selected a second arrow.

“Watch, you men! This one is for the tassel on the helmet of the door god on the right.”

The arrow whistled swiftly towards the tassel and hit it squarely. Both arrows stuck into the opened double doors. Hua Rong pulled a third arrow from the quiver.

“And this is for the heart of that captain in white!”

“Aiya!” the man exclaimed. He turned and fled. The rest of the company, yelling, followed hastily.

Hua Rong ordered that the gates of the enclosure be shut. He went to the rear hall to see Song Jiang. “I was late, brother,” he apologized, “and they made you suffer!”

“That doesn't matter. The only thing that worries me is that Liu Gao will probably try to get back at you. We'll have to make plans of our own.”

“I don't care if it means giving up this post! I'm going to have it out with him!”

“I never dreamed that woman would return evil for good and tell her husband to have me beaten! I was going to give my real name but then I thought that matter of Mistress Yan would cause trouble. So I said I was Zhang San, a merchant from Yuncheng. That pig of a Liu Gao wanted to send me, under the name of Zhang San, to the prefecture in a cage cart, and have me executed as a bandit chieftain from Clear Winds Mountain! If you hadn't rescued me, I could never have talked him round, even if my lips were of bronze and my tongue of iron!”

“I thought as a man of letters he'd surely sympathize with someone of the same name. That's why I wrote you were Liu Zhang. Who would have thought he'd be so lacking in feeling? Well, you've been rescued and brought home. Now we can wait and see.”

“You're wrong, brother. Though you've saved me by your military skill, you have to give this a lot of thought. 'Beware of hiccuping when you eat, and stumbling when you walk,' as the ancients say. You've openly snatched a prisoner away from him. And when he sent men to take me back, you frightened them off. Do you think he'll let it go at that? He's sure to send in a written report. I'd better take refuge on Clear Winds Mountain tonight. Tomorrow, you deny any knowledge of my affairs. It will seem like a mere squabble between civil and military administrators. If he captured me again, you wouldn't have a leg to stand on.”

“I'm a man of simple courage. I have none of your wisdom and farsightedness, brother. But will you be able to travel with your wounds?”

“It doesn't matter. There's no time to lose. Once I get to the foot of the mountain I'll be all right.”

Ointments and poultices were applied to Song Jiang's injuries, and he ate meat and drank wine. He left his pack in Hua Rong's care. Toward dusk, on Hua Rong's instructions, two soldiers saw him off to beyond the gates of the fort, and from there Song Jiang made his way through the night alone. Of that we'll say no more.

Liu Gao's men came straggling back. They said: “Hua Rong is very brave and fantastically skilled! None of us dared get within range of his bow!”

And the two captains added: “If one of his arrows hits, it lets daylight right through you! We couldn't approach him either!”

That knave Liu was, after all, a civilian official, and very crafty. “Because of this attempt to seize Song Jiang, Hua Rong is sure to let him leave for Clear Winds Mountain tonight,” he mused. “Tomorrow, he'll deny knowing anything about it. If I take it up with higher authorities, they'll assume it's just a tiff between civil and military administrators. How am I going to cope with him? I'll send twenty or thirty soldiers five *li* down the road to lie in wait for Song Jiang. If Heaven is kind and I nab him, I'll keep him quietly locked up here and send a man to the prefecture immediately with a request that the military command come and get him. They'll arrest Hua Rong at the same time and execute them both! Then I'll rule Fort Clear Winds alone, and won't have to take any more guff from those oafs!”

He picked twenty or so men and, armed with spears and staves, they set out the same night. Around the second watch they returned with Song Jiang, his hands tied behind his back. Liu Gao was delighted.

“Just as I expected! Lock him in the rear yard. No one is to know about this!”

Liu wrote a formal accusation which he dispatched to Qingzhou Prefecture by two trusted envoys, travelling through the night at flying speed.

The next day Hua Rong, who assumed that Song Jiang had already reached Clear Winds Mountain, sat at home thinking. “There's nothing he can do about it,” he said to himself, meaning Liu Gao. He made no inquiries, and Liu pretended to be unaware of anything unusual. Neither mentioned the matter.

In Qingzhou the prefect was holding court. His family name was Murong, his given name was Yanda, and his younger sister was a concubine of the emperor. With this backing he rode high in Qingzhou, harming the people, abusing his colleagues, and doing pretty much as he pleased. He was about to adjourn for breakfast when his police officers handed him the complaint from Commandant Liu alleging bandit activities. The prefect was startled.

“Hua Rong is the son of a military commander who has made great contributions to the nation. How could he be conspiring with the brigands on Clear Winds Mountain? That's a serious crime. Can it be true?”

He summoned the commander of the prefectural army and directed him to go and investigate. Huang Xin, the commander, highly skilled in weapons and much respected by the people of Qingzhou, was known as the “Suppressor of the Three Mountains.” There were three dangerous mountains under the jurisdiction of the prefecture: Clear Winds, Two-Dragon, and Peach Blossom. All were rife with bandits. Huang Xin boasted he would capture every one of them. Hence his nickname.

On receiving his orders from the prefect, he mustered fifty stalwart men, put on his armor, and mounted his horse, lethal blade in hand. The company arrived at Fort Clear Winds that same night and proceeded directly to Liu Gao's enclosure. Huang Xin dismounted and was led by Liu into the rear hall. Courtesies were exchanged, wine and food were served. His men were also taken care of. Then Song Jiang was brought out for the commander's examination.

“There's no need to question him,” said Huang Xin. “Make a cage cart and put the varlet in it!”

A red hand was tied around Song Jiang's head and a paper pennant inserted reading: “Zhang San of Yuncheng, chieftain of the Clear Winds Mountain bandits.” No one paid any attention to Song Jiang's denials. He could only submit to their will.

“Does Commandant Hua Rong know you've captured Zhang San?” asked Huang Xin.

“We caught him during the second watch and have kept him hidden here. Hua Rong thinks he's gone. He's sitting peacefully at home.”

“In that case, it will be easy. Tomorrow morning lay a feast of mutton and wine in the main hall of the fort, and conceal forty or fifty men all around. I will personally invite Hua Rong to attend. I'll say 'Prefect Murong has heard that you civil and military administrators are not getting along and has sent

me to bring you together over wine and make peace.' In that way I'll get him to the hall. When you see me fling down my cup, that will be the signal to grab him! I'll take them both with me back to the prefecture. How does that sound?”

“Very shrewd,” said Liu appreciatively. “You make it 'as simple as catching turtles in a jug.'”

That night the plan was finalized. At dawn the following day they hid soldiers in the tents left and right of the big hall, and preparations were made as if for a feast. After breakfast Huang Xin got on his horse and went with only two or three attendants to call on Hua Rong. The sentry at the gate announced his arrival.

“What does he want?”

“He told me only to say: 'Commander Huang is calling.'”

Hua Rong went out and welcomed him. The commander dismounted. Hua Rong invited him in and courtesies were exchanged.

“What business brings you here, Commander?”

“Orders from the prefect. He's heard that you and the civil administrator aren't getting along, but doesn't know why. He's afraid some private squabble will affect public affairs, so I've been sent to invite you two to a feast and make peace between you. It's all laid out in the big hall of the fort. I've come to fetch you.”

Hua Rong smiled. “Would I presume to be rude to Liu Gao? He's my superior. It's just that he's always finding fault. I never expected the prefect to be disturbed. And you've been troubled to come all the way to my humble home! I don't know how to apologize!”

Huang Xin leaned close and said in a low voice: “The prefect is on your side. If there ever should be any need to lead troops into action, what use would Liu Gao be? He's only a civil administrator. You just play along with me.”

“I'm grateful, Commander, for your concern.”

Huang Xin requested him to get on his horse and ride with him to the fort Hua Rong politely urged the commander to have a few cups of wine first.

“After we've smoothed this over, we can drink all we please,” said Huang Xin.

Hua Rong ordered his steed, and the two rode out side by side. At the fort they dismounted. The commander took him by the hand and they entered the hall together. Liu Gao was already waiting. The three men met and Huang Xin called for wine. Attendants led Hua Rong's horse away and closed the gates of the fort.

Hua Rong didn't know it was a plot. He considered Huang Xin a regular military official, and didn't suspect him of any evil design. The commander raised his cup and turned to Liu Gao.

“The prefect has heard that there is some discord between you two. He's quite worried and has sent me here to patch things up. He hopes you'll put your responsibility to the imperial court above all else, and that if you have any disagreements in the future you'll discuss them calmly.”

“I'm a man of no talent, who knows only a little administrative procedure,” said Liu Gao. “I'm very sorry the prefect is upset. There's no conflict between us here. That's just a rumor.”

Huang Xin laughed. “Excellent!”

Liu Gao drank. Huang Xin filled a second cup and addressed Hua Rong.

“In view of what Commandant Liu says, I'm sure it's only idle talk. Please join me in this round.”

Hua Rong drained his cup. Then Liu Gao poured wine for Huang Xin.

“A toast to you, Commander, in thanks for coming to our humble place. Drink it down.”

Huang Xin accepted the cup. Holding it in his hand, he looked around. About a dozen soldiers came into the hall. He flung the vessel to the floor. From the rear there rose a mighty clamor. Forty or fifty stalwart soldiers swarmed out of the tents on both sides of the hall, seized Hua Rong and pressed him down.

“Tie him up,” shouted Huang Xin.

“What crime have I committed?” protested Hua Rong.

Huang Xin laughed. “You dare to complain! You're in league with the bandits on Clear Winds Mountain, in defiance against the imperial court! That's your crime! It's only out of consideration for your past prestige that I'm not arresting your wife and family as well!”

“Where's your proof?”

“I'll show you proof. I'll let you see your spoils and one of your bandit cronies. Nobody's wronging you. Guards! Bring him here!”

A cage cart containing a man with a red headband and a paper pennant was rolled in. It was Song Jiang. Hua Rong gaped. They stared at each other, speechless.

“This has nothing to do with me,” said Huang Xin. “I'm acting on the charges of Liu Gao, the complainant here.”

“It doesn't matter who's accusing him,” said Hua Rong. “This man is my relation, from Yuncheng Town. If you insist that he's a bandit, we'll argue it out in court!”

“In that case I must take you along to the prefecture. You can do your arguing in person.” The commander told Liu Gao to muster a hundred soldiers for an escort.

“You tricked me into coming, Commander,” said Hua Rong. “Although you've arrested me, when we get to court the case will still have to be

argued. We're both military officials. Don't strip me of my clothes, but let me ride in a cage cart too.”

“That's easy. I grant your request. And I'm asking Commandant Liu to come with us to the prefecture so we can get this straightened out. We don't want anyone wrongfully executed.”

Huang Xin and Liu Gao mounted their horses. With fifty prefectural soldiers, plus a hundred from the fort, guarding the two cage carts they set out for Qingzhou.

And as a result, leaping flames consumed hundreds of homes, knives and axes took nearly two thousand lives. Truly, provocation brings trouble to the provoker, and injury rebounds against the injurer.

How did Song Jiang escape? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 34
Suppressor of the Three Mountains Embroils Qingzhou
Thunderbolt at Night Traverses a Field of Rubble

The mounted Huang Xin carried his lethal blade. Liu Gao, also on horseback and wearing armor, held a pitchfork in his hand. Their host of a hundred and fifty bore cudgels and staves and tassel-bedecked spears, and at their waists were swords and knives. Two rolls of the drums and a crash of the gongs, and the convoy guarding Song Jiang and Hua Rong left Fort Clear Winds and started towards the prefecture of Qingzhou.

Before they had gone forty *li* they saw ahead a large forest. As they neared a gap in the mountains, one of the advance guard—a soldier from the fort—pointed and exclaimed: “Men are watching us from among those trees!”

The entire procession immediately halted.

“Why have you stopped?” Huang Xin demanded, from his horse.

“People in that forest ahead are looking at us.”

“So what! Keep going!”

They drew nearer the forest. Suddenly twenty or thirty gongs began crashing in unison. The fort soldiers, panic-stricken, turned to flee.

“Stand where you are!” barked Huang Xin. “Spread out.” To Liu Gao he said: “Guard the cage carts!”

Liu was speechless with fright. He could only stammer to himself: “Heaven save me from disaster. Aiyaya! I pledge a hundred thousand scriptures! Thirty prayer services! Only save me!” His face was like a ripe melon—alternately green and yellow.

Huang Xin was a military officer, and he wasn't lacking in courage. He beat his horse forward and looked. On four sides of the forest nearly five hundred bandits were arrayed in ranks. All were fierce-visaged stalwarts. Their heads were wrapped in red cloth, they wore padded tunics, with sharp swords at their waists and long spears in their hands. They had the company completely surrounded.

Three bold fellows bounded out of the woods, one in black, one in green, one in red. All wore head kerchiefs emblazoned with gold swastikas and had swords at their waists. They stood, halberds in hand, blocking the road. The man in the middle was Elegant Tiger Yan Shun. On his right was Stumpy Tiger Wang Ying, on his left was the Fair-Faced Gentleman Zheng Tianshou. They shouted at Huang Xin.

“All travellers must stop here and pay three thousand ounces of gold, or they can't go on!”

Huang Xin, from his horse, yelled back: “Where are your manners, knaves? You're talking to Suppressor of the Three Mountains!”

The three glared. “We don't care who you are! Unless you pay three thousand ounces of gold you can't get through!”

“I'm a prefectural commander on an official mission! I don't have to buy your permission to travel!”

The bold trio laughed. “The emperor himself couldn't pass here without paying three thousand ounces of gold! If you haven't got it, leave your prisoners as security. We'll return them to you when you bring the money!”

Huang Xin was furious. “How dare you scoundrels act so high and mighty!” He shouted for his drums and gongs to sound, clapped his horse, and charged directly at Yan Shun, waving his sword.

All three bandit leaders raised their halberds and engaged Huang Xin. The commander, on horseback, fought them valiantly a dozen rounds, but three against one were too many. Liu Gao, trembling, was unable to move forward. Seeing the pickle Huang Xin was in, Liu got ready to run. Huang was afraid he'd be taken by the trio and that his reputation would be ruined. He pulled his horse around and returned at a gallop, pursued by the three halberd-wielding chieftains. Huang Xin had no time to consider the unit under his command. On flying steed he raced back alone to Clear Winds Town.

At this, his soldiers cried out in dismay. They abandoned the cage carts and scattered. Liu Gao desperately yanked at his horse's bridle and flailed three times with his whip. The animal broke into a run, but a trip-rope across the road quickly brought horse and rider tumbling down. A swarm of bandits seized Liu and captured the cage carts.

Hua Rong, who had already pried his cage open, jumped out and snapped his bonds. He broke open the other cart and rescued Song Jiang. Several of the bandits grabbed Liu Gao and tied his hands behind his back. They also caught his horse and three or four other mounts. They stripped Liu of his garments and gave them to Song Jiang, who was naked. The captured horses were first led up the mountain, then the three chieftains and Hua Rong and some bandits escorted the bound and stripped Liu Gao back to the stronghold.

Not having had any news of Song Jiang for some time, the three chieftains had sent a few competent scouts into Clear Winds Town to inquire. “Commander Huang Xin threw down his cup as a signal,” they were told, and had Hua Rong and Song Jiang arrested. They're both in cage carts, “and will be taken to Qingzhou.”

This was reported to the three chieftains, who came down with their men. They made a wide flanking sweep and were waiting on the road when the soldier convoy arrived. The small paths were covered as well. As a result Hua Rong and Song Jiang were saved and Liu Gao captured. All now returned to the mountain lair.

That night at the second watch hosts and guests gathered in Righteousness Hall. After Song Jiang and Hua Rong were seated in the middle, the three chieftains, sat down opposite and prepared to serve them with food and drink.

“Boys,” Yan Shun called to his men, “drink and be merry!”

Hua Rong thanked the brave trio. “You've saved the lives of my brother and me and avenged our wrongs! We can never repay you! My only worry is my wife and younger sister. They're still in Fort Clear Winds. Huang Xin is sure to seize them. How can they be rescued?”

“Don't worry, Commandant,” said Yan Shun. “I doubt whether Huang Xin will dare to take your lady. Even if he does, he'll have to pass here on his return to the prefecture. Tomorrow my two brothers and I will go down the mountain and bring your lady and sister here to you.” He ordered a scout to slip into town first and investigate.

“I'm very grateful,” said Hua Rong.

“And now bring that varlet Liu Gao to me,” said Song Jiang.

“He's tied to the main pillar,” said Yan Shun. “We'll cut out his heart and present to you as a gift!”

“I want to slice him open personally!” said Hua Rong.

“Knave,” cried Song Jiang, “there was never any enmity between us! Why did you listen to your wicked wife and injure me? Now we've caught you! What have you got to say?”

“What's the use of talking?” exclaimed Hua Rong. He plunged a knife into Liu's chest and carved, then placed the man's heart before Song Jiang. Bandits dragged the corpse to one side.

“We've killed this dirty beast, but his whore of a wife is still alive,” said Song Jiang. “Our vengeance hasn't yet been satisfied!”

“Set your mind at ease, brother,” said Wang the Stumpy Tiger. “When I go down tomorrow, I'll capture his woman. This time I'll keep her for myself.”

Everybody laughed. They feasted that night, then all retired. The next morning they rose and discussed their attack on Fort Clear Winds.

“The boys had a hard day, yesterday,” said Yan Shun. “We'll let them rest, today. Tomorrow morning, we'll go down. That will be time enough.”

“You're right,” said Song Jiang. “The men and horses must regain their strength. We mustn't be too hasty.”

When Huang Xin reached Clear Winds he hurried to the fort, mustered soldiers and mounts and posted a tight guard at each of the four gates. Then he wrote a dispatch and ordered two officers to deliver it at flying speed to Prefect Murong.

The prefect, on receiving reports from Clear Winds and learning of the emergency, summoned his court that same night. He was greatly alarmed when he read Huang Xin's dispatch. It said: “Hua Rong has rebelled and is involved with bandits on Clear Winds Mountain. There's no guarantee the fort can stand. The situation is critical. First-rate generals must be sent immediately to hold the territory!”

He summoned General Qin, commander of all the armed forces in the prefecture, to come at once for an urgent military conference. Qin, whose given name was Ming, was from Kaizhou on the other side of the mountains. Because of his irascible temper and booming voice he was known as Thunderbolt. Qin was descended from a long line of military

men. His weapon was a wolf-toothed mace, and when he plunged into battle, ten thousand men couldn't withstand him.

Qin presented himself before the prefect and the two exchanged courtesies. Murong showed him Huang Xin's dispatch.

“Those brigands have got their nerve,” growled Qin Ming. “Have no fears, Your Excellency. I'll get my forces ready. If I don't take those bandits I swear you'll never see me again!”

“Move quickly. They're liable to attack Fort Clear Winds.”

“There will be no delay. I'll muster my men tonight. We'll leave first thing in the morning.”

Pleased, the prefect directed that wine and meat and dry rations be prepared and kept in waiting outside the city for the troops on their departure. Qin Ming was enraged to learn that Hua Rong had rebelled. He mounted and rode back to headquarters. There he mustered a hundred cavalrymen and four hundred foot soldiers. He ordered them to assemble outside the city and get ready to march.

In a monastery courtyard in the outskirts the next day, Murong had muffins steamed, large bowls laid out, and wine heated. Each soldier was to be given three bowls of wine, two muffins and one catty of cooked meat. Everything was in readiness when the detachment was seen emerging from the city. On a crimson banner in the lead were the words: *General Qin, Commander of Infantry and Cavalry.*

Qin Ming in his armor was indeed a splendid sight. When he saw Murong waiting to encourage the troops, he ordered a soldier to hold his weapons, dismounted and went forward to be received by the prefect. Courtesies were exchanged, and Murong faced the general, wine cup in hand.

“May all go well and you return victorious!”

Food and drink were dispensed among the troops, a signal cannon was fired. Qin Ming took his leave of the prefect, and vaulted into the saddle.

He spread his forces in march formation. Bearing halberds and hatchets, they headed for Fort Clear Winds. The town of Clear Winds was southeast of Qingzhou, but it was quicker to go directly south and skirt around Clear Winds Mountain. Soon they were north of the mountain on a small road.

Bandit scouts reported their advance. The brigand chieftains had been getting ready to attack Fort Clear Winds when they heard the news: “Qin Ming is leading a force of men and horses this way!” They exchanged frightened glances.

“Don't be alarmed,” said Hua Rong. “As the old saying goes: 'When the enemy approach swiftly, they must be stopped in their tracks.' Give the men food and drink, and do what I say. We'll use force first, then guile.” He softly outlined his idea. “How does that strike you?”

“Excellent,” said Song Jiang. “Exactly the way to do it!”

He and Hua Rong worked out the details, then each bandit went to prepare for his own particular task. Hua Rong selected a good horse and armor, and got his bow, arrows and iron spear in readiness.

Qin Ming and his men pitched camp for the night ten *li* from the foot of the mountain. They rose at dawn the next day and had breakfast. A signal cannon was fired, and the march quickly resumed. The general chose a broad open area and deployed his forces in battle positions. Then he sounded his drums.

A thunderous crash of gongs responded from the mountain, and a brigand troop came rapidly down the slope. Qin Ming reined his mount and glared, wolf-toothed mace athwart his body. Surrounded by a horde of bandits was Hua Rong. Gongs crashed again when they got to the foot of the slope and arrayed themselves in battle formation. Iron spear in hand, Hua Rong, from his horse, hailed the general respectfully.

“Hua Rong,” Qin Ming shouted, “your family have been military commanders for generations, appointed officers of the imperial court. You were made commandant of the fort, put in control of a large area, and were paid and supported by the government. When were you given less than your

due? But now you're consorting with brigands and rebelling against the court! I've been sent to arrest you! If you're wise, you'll get off your horse and submit! Don't make me bloody my hands and soil my feet!”

“Hear me, General,” said Hua Rong with an apologetic smile. “I never wanted to rebel against the imperial court. It was all the doing of that scoundrel Liu Gao—making something out of nothing, using his official position for private revenge, forcing me to turn my back on home and country and take refuge here! I hope you will investigate, General, and straighten this out!”

“Dismount and be bound! What are you waiting for? Your fancy words are only meant to deceive my soldiers!” Qin Ming shouted for his drums left and right to thunder. Flourishing his wolf-toothed mace, he charged.

Hua Rong laughed. “A good man makes allowances for you, and you don't even know it. Just because I addressed you politely as a superior officer you thought I was afraid of you!” With levelled spear he spurred his horse forward.

The two men fought for nearly fifty rounds, neither vanquishing the other. Hua Rong executed a feint, wheeled his mount around and rode toward his bandits at the foot of the mountain. Qin Ming pursued furiously. Hua Rong rested his spear in his saddle rings, and reined in his horse. He fitted an arrow to his bow, pulled the string taut, then twisted around and let fly. The arrow neatly sheared the big red tassel from the top of the general's helmet, to give him a hint.

Startled, Qin Ming abruptly checked his mount. By the time he recovered himself enough to resume the chase, the bandits had all noisily swarmed back up the mountain. Hua Rong, on another path, also returned to the stronghold.

Qin Ming was enraged. “That dirty bandit is very rude!” he thought. He shouted for the drums and gongs to sound, and followed up the slope.

Yelling, the troops, climbed behind him, with the infantry in the lead. They crossed two or three crests when suddenly, from the cliffs above, they were

deluged with logs, rocks, bottles of lime and molten metal. The advance guard, unable to get away, suffered forty to fifty losses. The remainder were forced to retreat.

Very angry, Qin Ming led his horse down the slope and sought another path to the top. He was still searching at noon when, on the west side of the mountain, gongs crashed and a band of men bearing red flags sprang out from among the trees. Qin Ming immediately led his troops in a charge. But the gongs fell silent and the red flags disappeared. And the road on which his adversaries had come was not a true road at all, but only a few wood-cutters' paths, and even these were blocked with felled criss-crossed trees.

The general was about to have them cleared when a soldier reported: “Gongs on the east side of the mountain and a force coming with red flags!”

At the head of his men, Qin Ming galloped to the eastern slope. The gongs had ceased and the red flags were gone. The general looked everywhere for a path up the mountain. But all the trails were blocked with trees and brushwood.

Another scout reported: “Gongs on the western slope! And men with red flags again!”

Qin Ming clapped his mount and raced to the scene. The men had vanished, and so had their flags.

The general ground his teeth almost to powder. He was fuming with rage. Again the pounding of gongs shook the earth in the east. Again Qin Ming charged east with his detachment. And again there was not a bandit or red flag to be seen.

His chest swelling with fury, the general decided to send scouts up to seek a path. A clamor once more arose in the west. Qin Ming's anger spurted to the heavens. With his entire force he rushed westward. But nowhere on the mountain, above or below, could they see a single bandit. Qin Ming shouted for his men to find paths on both sides and start up.

“None of these are real paths,” one of the soldiers explained. “But on the southeast side there's a good road that goes to the top. We'd have serious casualties if we tried to climb here.”

“Since there's a road, we must reach it tonight.” Qin Ming marched rapidly southeast with his infantry and cavalry.

The light was beginning to fade, and men and horses were tired. Everyone was longing to reach their destination, where they could pitch camp and eat. But then on the mountain they saw torches dancing, and gongs wildly crashed. Qin Ming turned angrily and went up with a cavalry troop of fifty. They were met by a shower of arrows from among the trees. Several soldiers were wounded. The general had no choice but to lead his troop down again.

He directed his men to eat a meal, and not bother about anything else.

Just as they lit their fires, eighty or ninety bandits carrying torches came marching down the mountain, whistling shrilly. Qin Ming hastily went after them. The torches were extinguished. Although there was a moon, it was obscured by clouds, and its glow was dim.

Qin Ming lost all control of his temper. He ordered his soldiers to light torches and set fire to the woods. Through the mountain gap the strains of flute and drum drifted down. Qin Ming ran his horse up and looked. In the light of a dozen torches he saw Hua Rong and Song Jiang on a summit drinking wine. The general, unable to get at them, could only rein in his mount and curse.

Hua Rong laughed. “Calm yourself, General. Go back and rest. Tomorrow, you and I will battle to the death!”

“Rebellious brigand, come down! I'll fight you three hundred rounds right now!”

“You're weary, General. Defeating you today would be too easy. Come back tomorrow.”

Qin Ming was mad with rage. He wanted to find a path up, yet he feared Hua Rong's skill with a bow. He could only curse impotently. Suddenly he heard a clamor among his troops below. Hurriedly, he rode down. Fiery cannon-balls and flaming arrows were winging into them from the opposite slope. Twenty or thirty bandits were shooting at them from the shadows behind. Soldiers yelled, horses whinnied, and all crowded into a deep ravine for shelter.

By then it was nearly midnight, and the troops were groaning bitterly. Suddenly they were engulfed in a torrent of water, which came sweeping down, and they struggled for their lives. As they were crawling out, they were hooked by barbed poles and hauled up the mountain. Those who were unable to escape the water drowned in the rushing stream.

Qin Ming's brain was bursting with rage. He noticed a side path and urged his steed up. Before he had travelled fifty paces, horse and rider fell into a pit. Fifty brigands, who had been hiding in ambush, hooked him with their poles and hauled him out. They stripped him of his armor, clothes and helmet, bound him with ropes, retrieved the horse, and led their prizes up the slope.

The entire operation had been planned by Hua Rong and Song Jiang.

First they had the bandits keep Qin Ming running back and forth, east and west, till men and mounts were exhausted and didn't know what to do. Next, they dammed two brooks with sacks of earth. Late at night, when the soldiers and horses were forced to take shelter in the ravine, they released the pent-up waters and finished them off. More than half of Qin Ming's five hundred men were drowned in this manner. A hundred and sixty or seventy of the remainder were captured, along with seventy or eighty good horses. Not a single soldier got away. Finally, they trapped Qin Ming and his steed in the pit.

By the time bandits brought Qin Ming to the stronghold, it was already light. Five bold warriors, seated in Righteousness Hall, saw the men lead up the bound captive and detain him within the entry. Hua Rong left his armchair, hurried over, untied Qin Ming, supported him into the hall, then

dropped to his knees and kowtowed. The general at once returned the courtesy.

“I am your prisoner, a man you can pulverize to death,” he said. “Why do you greet me so respectfully?”

Hua Rong, still kneeling, replied: “Our men didn't recognize you and discomfited you by mistake! Please forgive us!” He presented Qin Ming with garments of silk and satin, and the general put them on.

“Who are these gallant leaders?” Qin Ming asked.

“This is my blood-brother Song Jiang, formerly clerk of Yuncheng County. These three are the chieftains here: Yan Shun, Wang Ying and Zheng Tianshou.”

“I have heard of these three, of course. And isn't County Clerk Song known in Shandong Province as Song Jiang the Timely Rain?”

“That is my humble name,” said Song Jiang.

Qin Ming hastily kowtowed. “I've long known your fame. I never thought I'd have the honor of meeting you today!”

Song Jiang at once returned the courtesy. Qin Ming noticed that he moved his legs awkwardly.

“Is there something wrong with your legs?” the general queried.

Song Jiang told him of his adventures from the time he left Yuncheng until Liu Gao had him beaten. Qin Ming shook his head.

“We heard only one side of the story and made a lot of mistakes. Let me go back and tell Prefect Murong about this.”

Yan Shun begged that he stay with them a few days, and ordered that sheep and horses be slaughtered and a feast be laid. The captured soldiers were concealed in buildings on the rear of the mountain, but they too were given food and wine. After the general had downed a few cups, he rose to his feet.

“Since you are good enough not to kill me, sirs, return my armor, horse and weapons, and let me go back to the prefecture.”

“You would be wrong to do that, General,” said Yan Shun. “You've lost all of your five hundred men. How can you return? Prefect Murong would surely condemn you as a criminal. Better to remain in our crude mountain fortress for a while. Although it's beneath your talents, why not stay on with us permanently? Gold and silver we share and share alike, and we give clothing in complete sets. Wouldn't that be preferable to being persecuted by the big-hat officials?”

Qin Ming walked to the entry of the hall. “I was born a man of the great Song empire, and I shall serve it as a ghost when I die. The court commissioned me a general and gave me the rank of Commander of Infantry and Cavalry. They've treated me very well. How can I rebel and become a brigand? Kill me and be done with it!”

Hua Rong hurried after him and took his arm. “Don't be angry, brother. Please listen to me. I am the son of a high court official myself. But I had no choice. I was forced into this. If you're not willing, we wouldn't dream of insisting. Please be seated. When the meal is over I will get your armor, helmet, horse and weapons and return them to you.”

Qin Ming still held back, and Hua Rong continued to exhort him. “You've expended strength and spirit a whole day and night, General. You must be exhausted. And how will your horse be able to travel unless it is fed?”

“That's true,” thought Qin Ming. He went back into the hall and resumed his seat. The five bold gallants apologized to him and toasted him by turns.

The general was indeed weary, and his hosts' considerate treatment softened his reluctance. So he relaxed and drank until he was bleary. Then he was helped into bed and he slept. The others went about their various affairs. Of that we'll say no more.

Qin Ming slept right through till mid-morning the following day. He jumped out of bed, washed, rinsed his mouth, and announced he was leaving. “Wait until after breakfast,” his hosts urged, “and we'll see you off

down the mountain.” But the impetuous Qin Ming insisted on departing at once. Food and wine were hastily served. The general dressed in his helmet and armor. His horse was led out and his wolf-toothed mace brought. Men were sent on ahead to attend him below.

The five bold gallants saw him off down the mountain and bid him farewell. Qin Ming's horse and weapons were returned. He mounted and, holding his wolf-toothed mace, left Clear Winds Mountain and set out rapidly for Qingzhou in the broad light of day.

When he was about ten *li* from the town—it was then late morning—he saw much smoke in the distance, but no travellers on the road. A strong suspicion rose in his mind. Soon he reached the outskirts of the town. Here, what was formerly a community of hundreds of families had been completely burned out. Everywhere were disorderly heaps of tiles and rubble. Scorched bodies of men and women lay without number.

Shocked, Qin Ming raced his horse across the debris to the town wall and shouted for the guards to open the gates. The bridge over the moat was up, and the top of the wall was lined with soldiers, flags, log sections and ballista stones. The general reined in his steed.

“Lower the bridge,” he shouted. “Let me in!”

The men on the wall had seen him coming from afar. Now they beat the drums and yelled.

“I am commander Qin Ming! Why don't you let me in?”

Prefect Murong appeared on the battlements. “Rebellious brigand,” he cried. “Have you no shame! You came last night with men and attacked the town! You slaughtered many innocent people and burned scores of homes! And today you try to trick us into opening the gates'. The imperial court treated you very well, but you have behaved outrageously, you scoundrel! I have already reported you to the court. Sooner or later we'll catch you and pound you to bits!”

“You're mistaken, Your Excellency! My forces were defeated and I was taken up the mountain by those rascally bandits. I've only just got away from them. How could I have attacked the town last night?”

“Don't I know your horse, armor, weapons and helmet? Everyone on the wall clearly saw you directing red-turbaned bandits in murder and arson! You can't deny it. If you were defeated and captured, how is it that not a single one of your five hundred soldiers came back and reported? You'd like to beguile us into opening the gates so that you can get your family out? We executed your wife this morning! If you don't believe me, look at this!”

A soldier held out a spear. Dangling from the end of it was the head of Qin Ming's wife. The general was an emotional man. Rage filled his chest. Speechless, he could only bitterly lament. Arrows rained down on him from the wall. He had to withdraw. He gazed at the fire-gutted homes. In some places wood was still burning.

As Qin Ming rode through the rabble he seriously considered killing himself. But after thinking a long time, he let his horse wander back along the road on which he had come. Before he had gone ten *li* he saw a band of mounted men riding towards him from a grove. The five bold fellows in the lead were none other than Song Jiang, Hua Rong, Yan Shun, Wang Ying, and Zheng Tianshou. They were followed by nearly two hundred bandits. Song Jiang bowed in the saddle.

“Didn't you return to Qingzhou, Commander? Where are you going, out here alone?”

“Some villain rejected by Heaven and Earth—who deserves to be cut to pieces!—disguised himself as me, attacked the town, levelled homes and slaughtered the people! As a result my whole family was executed, and I have nowhere to go! If I could find that rogue I'd pound him till my wolf-toothed mace broke to pieces!”

“Calm yourself, General! I have a suggestion, but this isn't a good place to talk. Please come to our stronghold and we'll confer there. If you permit us, we'll go now.”

Qin Ming had no choice but to acquiesce, and all rode to Clear Winds Mountain.

During the journey, no one spoke. They dismounted at the pavilion outside the gates of the lair and entered on foot. Bandits had already laid out wine and tidbits in Righteousness Hall. The five gallant men invited Qin Ming in and asked him to be seated in the middle. Then they knelt before him. The general hastily returned the courtesy. Song Jiang spoke first.

“We hope you won't blame us, General. Yesterday, we tried in vain to convince you to remain with us, but you were determined to leave, and so I thought of a plan. I had one of our men put on your armor and helmet, take your wolf-toothed mace, and ride your horse to Qingzhou Town with a band in red turbans and kill many people. Yan Shun and Stumpy Tiger Wang went with reinforcements of another fifty, and made it appear that you were trying to bring out your family. We committed all this murder and arson to compel you to give up any hope of ever going back! Today, we present ourselves before you for punishment!”

Qin Ming was furious. He longed to throw himself on Song Jiang. But then he realized that, first, this had been fated. Second, he had been put at a disadvantage by their abject courtesy. And third, he couldn't vanquish them single-handed anyway. He was forced to swallow his rage.

“You meant well, brothers,” he conceded, “but you injured me grievously! You caused my whole family to be killed!”

“If we hadn't acted the way we did, would you have given up the idea of returning?” said Song Jiang. “Hua Rong has a younger sister who would make you a fine wife. She's virtuous and clever. I would be delighted to sponsor the match and provide all your household furnishings. What do you say?”

This love and respect touched the general's heart, and he agreed. Everyone insisted that Song Jiang sit in the center, with Qin Ming, Hua Rong and the other three bold fellows occupying seats of lesser rank. Heartily, they ate and drank, and discussed the forthcoming attack on Fort Clear Winds.

“That's easy,” said Qin Ming. “You brothers don't have to worry. Huang Xin was under my command. Whatever he knows about arms, I taught him. What's more, we're on excellent terms. Tomorrow I'll go to the fort, get them to open the gate, talk privately with Huang Xin, and persuade him to join us. I'll bring out Hua Rong's family, capture Liu Gao's termagant wife, and avenge the hurts you have suffered. This will be my entrance gift. How does that strike you?”

“We are privileged to have so generous a man as a colleague,” exclaimed Song Jiang.

When the feast was over, all retired. They rose early the following morning, breakfasted, and made ready. Qin Ming mounted and went down the slope. Wolf-toothed mace in hand, he raced to Clear Winds.

From the day he arrived in the town Huang Xin mobilized the soldiers and the people, kept the forces in the fort on continuous alert, and closely guarded the gates. But he dared not go forth to give battle. Though he frequently sent emissaries to Qingzhou to inquire, the prefecture show no sign of sending him any reinforcements.

Now, a man came in and reported: “Commander Qin Ming is here, alone, on horseback. He wants us to open the gate and let him in.”

Huang Xin mounted and galloped to the portal. Sure enough, there was only a single rider. Huang Xin ordered his men to open the gate and lower the drawbridge. He welcomed the general, rode with him to the main hall and invited him in. Both dismounted, entered the hall and exchanged courtesies.

“What brings you here, alone, General?” asked Huang Xin.

Qin Ming told how he had lost his men and horses, then said: “Song Jiang the Timely Rain from Shandong is generous and chivalrous. He befriends every good fellow under the sun and is respected by all. Today, he is on Clear Winds Mountain, where I have joined their band. You have no wife and family. If you heed my advice, you'll join up too. It's better than forever taking abuse from civilian officials!”

“Since you are there, Excellency, how can I refuse? I never heard that Timely Rain is on the mountain. How did he get there?”

Qin Ming laughed. “He's the 'Zhang San' of Yuncheng you were escorting to the prefecture the other day. He was afraid to give his real name because Of another case he's involved in. So he called himself Zhang San.”

Huang Xin stamped his foot. “Had I known he was Song Jiang, I'd have let him go on the road! I didn't recognize him and heard only Liu Gao's version of the story. I nearly caused his death!”

While the two were conferring in the hall, a soldier entered.

“Two columns of foot soldiers and cavalry, beating drums and gongs, are advancing swiftly on the town!”

Qin Ming and Huang Xin mounted and rode out to confront the foe. At the gate they saw beneath a huge cloud of dust which blocked the sun an approaching host whose fierce aura obscured the heavens.

Two columns of troops were closing in on the town. Four gallant men had come down from the mountain.

How did Qin Ming and Huang Xin meet the foe? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 35
Shi Yong Delivers a Letter in a Village Tavern
Hua Rong Shoots a Wild Goose on Mount Liangshan

But when Huang Xin and Qin Ming went outside the gate and took a closer look they saw that one of the columns was led by Song Jiang and Hua Rong, the other by Yan Shun and Stumpy Tiger Wang, and there were about a hundred and fifty men in each. Huang Xin ordered the fort soldiers to lower the drawbridge and open the gates. He himself went forward to greet the arrivals and conduct them into the town.

Song Jiang had already instructed his men that they were not to harm any of the local people or the soldiers in the fort. Now they fought their way into the southern enclosure and killed every member of Liu Gao's family with the exception of his wife. She was taken by Stumpy Tiger Wang. The bandits loaded all of Liu Gao's gold and silver and other valuables onto carts. Liu had also had a number of horses, cattle and sheep. All of these were led away.

Hua Rong loaded onto carts the valuables in his own compound, and moved out with his wife, children and younger sister. The townspeople who had been serving in his household he bid return to their homes.

When all was in order, the brave brigands, left the town of Clear Winds and went back as a single detachment to their mountain stronghold.

Zheng Tianshou welcomed the new arrivals in Righteousness Hall. Huang Xin greeted the assembled gallants and was seated below Hua Rong. Song Jiang directed that Hua Rong's wife and children be provided with a place to rest, and that Liu Gao's property be distributed among the bandits. Stumpy Tiger Wang concealed the woman he had captured in his own quarters.

Yan Shun asked: “Where is Liu Gao's wife?”

“This time you must let me keep her as my woman,” said Wang.

“You can have her. But call her out. I have something to say,” said Yan Shun.

“And I want to question her,” said Song Jiang.

Wang summoned the woman into the hall. Weeping, she begged for mercy.

“I saved you and let you go, you harpy! I treated you as the lady of an official,” shouted Song Jiang. “Why did you stab me in the back? We've caught you now! What have you got to say for yourself?”

Yan Shun leaped from his chair. “Why bother with a hussy like her?” He pulled out a sword and cut her in two.

Stumpy Tiger was enraged. He grabbed his halberd and advanced on Yan Shun. Song Jiang quickly rose and intervened.

“Yan Shun was right to kill her, brother,” he said. “You saw how, thanks to my efforts, she was allowed to leave the mountain and rejoin her husband. Yet she made a complete about-face and had him injure me. Brother, if you kept her by your side, sooner or later she would have caused trouble. I promise to find you a good wife, one who'll completely satisfy you.”

“I was flunking the same thing, brother,” said Yan Shun. “If we didn't kill her, one day she would harm us.”

The others also spoke placating words to Wang. He listened in silence. Yan Shun ordered that the corpse be removed and the blood cleaned away, and that a feast of celebration be laid in the hall.

The next day, with Song Jiang and Huang Xin serving as sponsors, and Yan Shun, Stumpy Tiger Wang and Zheng Tianshou acting as introducers, Hua Rong's sister was wedded to Qin Ming. All gifts and furnishings were contributed by Song Jiang and Yan Shun. Feasting lasted for font of five days.

About a week after the marriage a scout came up the mountain and reported: “Prefect Murong of Qingzhou has advised the Council of Administration in writing that Hua Rong, Qin Ming and Huang Xin have rebelled, and requests that a large army be sent to annihilate them.”

“We couldn't hold out long in this small stronghold,” the leaders agreed. “How could we cope if we were surrounded by a big army?”

“I have an idea,” said Song Jiang. “But I don't know if you gentlemen will find it suitable.”

“We'd like to hear it.”

“South of here is an area called Liangshan Marsh. It's about eight hundred *li* in circumference and embraces the Water-Girt Fortress and the Liao Er Lowlands. There, Chao Gai the Heavenly King has amassed a force of nearly five thousand men. They control the entire region. When government troops go out hunting robbers, they don't dare even look in their direction. Why don't we gather our men and horses and join their band?”

“Since there is such a place, that sounds fine to me,” said Qin Ming. “But we don't have anyone to take us to them. Would they be willing to accept us?”

Song Jiang laughed. He told of the hijacking of the birthday gifts, and how Liu Tang had delivered Chao Gai's letter to him and sent him gold in thanks, and how this resulted in his having to kill Mistress Yan and flee to the gallant fraternity.

“Then you are their benefactor, brother,” said Qin Ming, very pleased. “There's no time to lose. Let's get our things together quickly.”

Final plans were made that day. A dozen or so carts were laden with wives, children, gold, silver, valuables, clothing and luggage, and nearly three hundred good horses rounded up. Those bandits who didn't wish to go were given silver and sent down the mountain to seek other masters. The remainder, including the soldiers Qin Ming had brought, amounted to about five hundred men. Song Jiang ordered that they divide into three contingents and set out. They were to pretend to be government troops on their way to capture Mount Liangshan.

When everything that was to be taken along was loaded on the carts, the stronghold was burned to the ground, and the expedition started down the mountain in three units. The unit led by Song Jiang and Hua Rong contained nearly fifty foot soldiers and the same number on horseback. They guarded the women and children on six or seven carts, and went first. Second was Qin Ming and Huang Xin with around ninety horses and the supply wagons. Bringing up the rear was Yan Shun, Stumpy Tiger Wang and Zheng Tianshou with fifty horses and about two hundred men. They headed for Liangshan Marsh. People seeing this large contingent of soldiers and horses on the road, observed too their banner clearly inscribed with:

Official Bandit Capturing Force, and so no one dared stop them. By the end of a week, they were far from the prefecture of Qingzhou.

The forward unit, led by Song Jiang and Hua Rong was only about twenty *li* in advance of the units following. They arrived at a place called Twin Mountains. It consisted of two high mountains, identical in shape, with a broad post road running between. On the heights ahead they heard the beating of drums and gongs.

“Robbers!” said Hua Rong.

He fastened his spear to his saddle, took out his bow and arrows, checked them over, then put the bow back in its “flying-fish” case. After shouting for his cavalry to urge the other two units to catch up, he concentrated all his carts, people and horses together. Hua Rong and Song Jiang then went forward with twenty riders to scout the road ahead.

Before they had gone half a *li* they saw a company of over a hundred mounted men, in red clothing and red armor, gathered around a young warrior, also in red. His weapon levelled, he reined in his horse at the foot of the slope and shouted: “You and I are going to fight it out today, until one wins and the other loses!”

Around the bend of the mountain opposite came another hundred horsemen. These were all dressed in white, surrounding a young warrior similarly clad. He was carrying a crescent-tipped lance. This band had white banners, that band had red.

Now the banners waved, and the thunder of drums shook the earth. There was no further parley between the young men. Lances in hand they galloped forward and fought over thirty rounds on the broad road, with neither the victor. Hua Rong and Song Jiang watched in admiration from their horses, Hua Rong edging his mount closer step by step. One of the lances was hung with the tail of a spotted leopard. From the other dangled a pennant marked with golden coins. In the heat of battle, the woollen tassels decorating the weapons had become entangled, and the lances couldn't be pulled apart.

Hua Rong immediately produced his bow from its “flying-fish” case with his left hand, snatched an arrow from its animal-shaped quiver with his right, notched the shaft to the string, pulled the bow to the full, and let fly at the tangle of leopard's tail and strings of wool. The arrow clipped the wool neatly and the weapons came free. A mighty cheer welled from the throats of the two hundred watchers.

The warriors halted their combat and raced over to Song Jiang and Hua Rong. They bowed from their saddles.

“May we ask the name of the officer who shot that miraculous arrow?”

“This pledged brother of mine is Song Jiang, clerk of the Yuncheng magistracy in Shandong, and known as the Timely Rain,” said Hua Rong. “I am Hua Rong, commandant of the fort at Clear Winds.”

The young men stabbed their lances into the ground, dismounted and kowtowed like falling gold mountains or toppling pillars of jade.

“We have long known the fame of you both!”

Song Jiang and Hua Rong hastily got off their horses and raised up the two young men.

“Please tell us what you young warriors are called.”

“I am Lu Fang,” said the man in red. “My family are Tanzhou people. Because I've modelled myself after Duke Lu Bu of antiquity and have learned, like him, to use the crescent-tipped lance, people call me the Little Duke. I used to trade in medicinal herbs in Shandong, but I lost all my money and couldn't go home. So I set up as a robber on Twin Mountains. Recently, this warrior came and tried to take over. I proposed that he control one mountain and I the other, but he wouldn't agree. Every day I come down and fight him. I didn't realize that today I was fated to meet Your Excellencies.”

Song Jiang then questioned the man in white, and he said: “I am Guo Sheng, from Jialing in Sichuan. I was a trader in mercury, but the wind

upset my boat while crossing the Yellow River and I couldn't return home. I had learned the crescent lance from a Major Zhang in Jialing, and became quite good at it. Everyone called me the Second Rengui. I heard in the gallant fraternity that there was another lance man holding Twin Mountains and robbing, and I came here to match weapons with him. Though we've fought for more than ten days now neither can vanquish the other. But it has given us the Heaven-sent opportunity to meet you two gentlemen today!”

Song Jiang told them everything that had transpired earlier, and said: “Since we've been fortunate enough to meet, suppose we make peace between you two, how will that be?”

The two warriors were delighted, and they agreed. By then the rear units had caught up, and each bold fellow came forward and was introduced. Lu Fang invited them to his mountain lair, where he slaughtered cattle and horses and laid a feast. Guo Sheng wined and dined them the following day. Song Jiang proposed that they combine forces and go together to Mount Liangshan and join up with Chao Gai.

Both young men accepted with pleasure. They mustered their men and horses, gathered their valuables, and prepared to set forth.

“Not so fast. We can't do it this way,” Song Jiang cautioned. “If we advance on Liangshan Marsh with five hundred men and mounts, their scouts will report it and they'll think we've come to capture them. That won't be any joke! Let me and Yan Shun talk to them first, and the rest of you come later. March in three units, like before.”

“Brother is far-sighted,” said Hua Rong and Qin Ming. “We'll proceed according to your plan. You take half a day's start. The rest of us will look after our people and horses, and follow.”

With Yan Shun, mounted, and a dozen men on foot, Song Jiang rode on towards Liangshan Marsh. Noon of the second day found them travelling on the highway. They observed a large tavern ahead.

“You're tired,” Song Jiang said to his men. “We'll stop and have some wine.”

He and Yan Shun dismounted, told the men to loosen the horses' girths, then all entered the tavern. There were only three large tables and a few small ones. A man was sitting alone at one of the large tables. His head kerchief was knotted like a pig's snout, with expensive circlets of twisted bronze thread from Taiyuan hanging down behind. He wore a black silk tunic and had a white girdle around his waist. His legs were clad in knee-length stockings. Hempen sandals shod his feet. A short stiff rested beside him a bundle lay on the far side of the table. He was tall, sallow, clean-shaven, with protuberant cheekbones and bright eyes. Song Jiang summoned a waiter.

“We have a large party. My friend and I will sit inside. Ask that gentleman to change his table for a smaller one, and leave the big one to my men.”

“I'll attend to it.”

Song Jiang and Yan Shun seated themselves inside and instructed the waiter: “First give each of our party three large bowls of wine and some meat, if you have any. Then serve us here.”

The men filled the kitchen, and the waiter approached the fellow sitting alone. He looked to be some sort of police guard.

“Can I trouble you, corporal? Won't you give this large table to the party of those two gentlemen inside?”

The man bridled at this lowly form of address. “I was here first,” he said irritably. “I'm not moving for any gentlemen's party!”

“He's acting pretty rude,” Yan Shun said to Song Jiang.

“Let him. You mustn't go down to his level in dealing with a fellow like that.” Song Jiang pushed Yan Shun back into his seat.

The man turned and looked at Song Jiang, and laughed coldly. The waiter continued his urging.

“Please help me out. What harm is there in changing a table?”

Angrily, the man pounded the table. “Varlet, who do you think you're talking to! Don't try to push me around because I'm alone. I wouldn't change for the emperor himself! If you keep yammering I'll give you a taste of my long-necked fists!”

“I didn't say anything wrong.”

“A churl like you wouldn't dare!”

This was too much for Yan Shun. “You, fellow, don't act so friggin tough! If you don't want to change, forget it! Just quit your friggin bullying!”

The man leaped to his feet and grasped his short staff. “It's none of your business what I say to him! There are only two men under the heavens I respect! The rest are dirt beneath my feet!”

Angry, Yan Shun picked up a stool and lumbered forward. But Song Jiang was struck by what the man had said, and he placed himself between them.

“Neither of you start anything! Let me ask you: Who are the only two men under the heavens you respect?”

“If I told you, you'd be awe-stricken!”

“What are their names?”

“One is from Henghai County in Cangzhou, descendant of the imperial Chai family—Lord Chai, the Small Whirlwind.”

Song Jiang silently nodded. “And the second?”

“Another miraculous man! Clerk of the Yuncheng magistracy in Shandong, Song Jiang the Timely Rain, Defender of Chivalry!”

Song Jiang looked at Yan Shun and smiled. Yan Shun had long since set down his stool.

“Those are the only two I have any regard for. Even the emperor of the great Song Dynasty can't scare me!”

“Not so fast,” said Song Jiang. “I know those two you mentioned. Let me ask you—where did you meet them?”

“Since you know them, I won't lie. Three years ago I spent four months in Lord Chai's manor. But I've never met Song Jiang.”

“Would you like to?”

“I'm searching for him right now.”

“Who asked you to do that?”

“His brother Song Qing the Iron Fan has given me a letter for him from home.”

Smiling, Song Jiang took the man's arm. “If fated, men come together though a thousand *li* apart. If not, they miss each other though they meet face to face. I am Song Jiang, the man you seek!”

The fellow stared at him, then dropped to his knees and kowtowed. “Heaven ordained that I should find you, brother! I might have missed you and gone on to look for you at Squire Kong's!”

Song Jiang pulled him inside and asked: “Is something wrong at home?”

“Listen, brother. My name is Shi Yong, I'm from the prefecture of Darning. I used to run a gambling house there. Local people nicknamed me General Shi. I got into a quarrel with a fellow while gambling and killed him with one blow of my fist. I ran away and took refuge with Lord Chai. Many of the gallant fraternity there spoke of you, brother, so I went to Yuncheng to join you, but you were away. I met your younger brother, and when he heard I came from Lord Chai's manor, he said you were at Squire Kong's, on White Tiger Mountain. I told him I would go to you there, and he wrote a letter and asked me to deliver it to you. 'When you find my brother,' he said, 'tell him to come home at once.'”

Worried, Song Jiang asked: “How many days did you stay at our manor? Did you see my father?”

“I just spent one night, then left. I didn't see the old gentleman.”

Song Jiang told him of their plan to go to Liangshan Marsh. Shi Yong said: “After I left Lord Chai's I heard of you often from men of the gallant fraternity, how generous and upright you are, how you help those in difficulty and danger. If you're joining the band on Mount Liangshan you must take me with you.”

“That goes without saying. What's one man more? Come and meet Yan Shun.”

Song Jiang told the waiter to pour. After the three had drunk, Shi Yong got the letter from his bundle and handed it to Song Jiang. The clerk looked at it. The envelope was sealed the opposite of normal, and it was not inscribed with the usual “All's well.” Song Jiang's anxiety increased. He tore open the envelope and read the letter. It concluded with:

... Early in the first lunar month father died of illness. He is still lying in his coffin at home. We are waiting for you to return so that we can bury him. Please return immediately, do not delay!

In sorrow, your younger brother, Qing

Song Jiang cried out in anguish and beat his chest. “Unfilial son that I am! How badly I've behaved! He is dead and I am not there to perform my duties as a son! I'm no better than a beast!” He beat his head against the wall and lamented. Yan Shun and Shi Yong put their arms around him, and he wept till he was dazed. It was some time before he recovered.

“Don't take it so hard, brother,” the other two urged.

“I'm not without feeling for our men,” he said at last, “but my old father was the one I loved best. Now he's gone. I must return home tonight. Tell our brothers to go up the mountain themselves.”

“Brother,” said Yan Shun, “the old gentleman is no more. Even if you went home, you wouldn't see him alive. All parents die. Take a long-range view. Lead us to the stronghold, and then I'll accompany you back for the funeral. It won't be too late. 'Without a head a snake can't travel,' as the old saying goes. They'll never let us in if you're not with us.”

“It would delay me for days. I can't do it. I'll write a letter in detail, telling the whole story. Take Shi Yong with you. When the others catch up, go together up the mountain. It would be different if I hadn't heard about my father's death. But since Heaven has let me know, every day seems like a year. I'm burning to get back! I don't want my horse and I don't need anybody to go with me. I'll travel alone through the night and be home tomorrow!”

Nothing Yan Shun and Shi Yong said could make Song Jiang change his mind.

He had the waiter bring pen and paper and, weeping, he wrote the letter, exhorting the stronghold leaders to accede to his wishes. Then he handed the missive, unsealed, to Yan Shun. He borrowed Shi Yong's hemp sandals, concealed some silver on his person, hung a sword at his waist, and took Shi Yong's short cudgel. Song Jiang wouldn't pause even long enough to let food and wine touch his lips. He walked directly through the door.

“Brother, wait at least till you've seen Qin Ming and Hua Rong. There'll still be time,” urged Yan Shun.

“I won't wait. Just take my letter and everything will go smoothly. Brother Shi Yong please explain to our brothers about my father's death, and ask them to forgive me for leaving in such haste.”

Song Jiang regretted only that he couldn't get home in one bound. Alone, he flew off down the road.

Yan Shun and Shi Yong drank some wine, ate some tidbits, and paid the bill. Shi Yong took Song Jiang's horse and they proceeded with the men another four or five *li* till they came to a large inn. There, they put up for the night.

The next day, by mid-morning, the rest of the expedition arrived. Yan Shun and Shi Yong told about Song Jiang's rushing home for the funeral of his father. The other leaders berated Yan Shun.

“Why didn't you keep him here a while?”

“He wanted to kill himself when he heard his father died,” Shi Yong explained. “Nobody could prevent him from leaving. He was in a tearing hurry. He's written a detailed letter of introduction and wants us to go on ahead. He says when they see the letter, there won't be any problem.”

Hua Rong and Qin Ming read the missive. “This has happened while we're on the march. Whether we go forward or retreat, we're going to have difficulties,” they said. “We can't go back, we can't split up. The only thing we can do is advance. Let's seal the letter and bring it to the leaders on the mountain. If they won't accept us, that will be the time to discuss what to do next.”

The nine bold gallants, marching together, pressed on with their band of five hundred men and horses towards Liangshan Marsh. As they travelled along a broad road through a reedy section, the beat of drums and gongs rang out across the water. Suddenly the slopes and the meadows were alive with colored flags and pennants. Two quick craft shot out to the center of the lake. The first was manned by forty or fifty bandits. Seated on the prow was Panther Head Lin Chong, their chieftain. On the second craft was the same number of bandits, and on its prow sat another leader, Liu Tang the Red-Haired Demon.

Lin Chong hailed the marchers: “Who are you churls? Which official's army? Do you think you can capture us? We'll kill every one of you! Not a man will be left alive! You ought to know the reputation of Liangshan Marsh!”

Hua Rong and Qin Ming got off their horses and stood on the shore. “We're not government troops,” they called. “We have a letter here from our brother Song Jiang, the Timely Rain, of Shandong. We've come to join you!”

“Since it's brother Song Jiang who's written, please go on ahead to the tavern of Zhu Gui. Show him the letter and then we can meet.”

A black flag on Lin Chong's boat waved, and a little craft with three fishermen glided out of the reeds. One remained in the boat and two came ashore.

“You officers come with us,” they said.

A white flag waved on one of the two larger craft, and they sailed on, to the crash of gongs. The newcomers gazed around in astonishment. “No wonder government troops don't dare interfere here. Our little mountain stronghold could never compare!”

Following the two fishermen, they made a wide sweep and arrived at the tavern of Zhu Gui the Dry-Land Crocodile. Zhu Gui greeted them, ordered the slaughter of two yellow oxen, and wined and dined his guests.

He read the letter, then led them to a pavilion overlooking the water and shot a whistling arrow into the reeds on the opposite shore. A little craft sped over. Zhu Gui gave the bandit boatman the letter and directed him to deliver it to the stronghold. Then, in the inn, he feted the nine chieftains with pork and mutton. Places of rest were provided for the men and horses, and all retired.

At mid-morning the next day the bandits' military advisor Wu Yong arrived at the inn. Each of the chieftains was introduced and courtesies were exchanged. Wu questioned them carefully. Then nearly thirty large boats came. Wu Yong and Zhu Gui invited the nine chieftains to board. The wives, children, carts, men, horses and belongings were all also loaded on the various craft.

They sailed to the Shore of Golden Sands, and there disembarked. Through the pines a host of gallant men, headed by Chao Gai and accompanied by drums and musical instruments, advanced to greet them. The nine chieftains were provided with horses and sedan-chairs and were conducted into the stronghold to Righteous Fraternity Hall. There they were seated, facing their hosts, in opposite rows.

In the armchairs on the left were Chao Gai, Wu Yong, Gongsun Sheng, Liu Chong, Liu Tang, Ruan the Second, Ruan the Fifth, Ruan the Seventh, Du Qian, Song Wan, Zhu Gui, and Bai Sheng the Daylight Rat. (Several months before, he had escaped from the prison in Jizhou, fled to Mount Liangshan and joined the band. Wu Yong had sent someone to bribe the jailors.)

In the armchairs on the right were Hua Rong, Qin Ming, Huang Xin, Yan Shun, Wang Ying, Zheng Tianshou, Lu Fang, Guo Sheng, and Shi Yong.

Fragrant incense was lit in a burner between the rows, and both sides vowed loyalty. That day they celebrated joyously. Steers and horses were slaughtered, and a banquet was laid. The newly arrived rank and file respectfully greeted the stronghold leaders outside the hall, then joined the lesser officers in a feast. Living quarters on the rear of the mountain were provided for the wives and children.

Qin Ming and Hua Rong, at the dining-table, praised Song Jiang's many virtues, and told how he was avenged on Clear Winds Mountain. The leaders heard this with delight. They related how Lu Fang and Guo Sheng fought with lances and how Hua Rong, with a single arrow, sliced the tangled woollen tassels and freed their weapons.

Chao Gai didn't believe it. “Can he really shoot so accurately?” he asked. “I'd like to see it some day.”

All imbibed wine till they were half drunk, and many food courses had been served. “Let's stroll for a while on the front of the mountain,” the hosts suggested, “and then come back for more.”

With each politely begging the other to go first, hosts and guests went down the stairs and wandered about admiring the scenery. When they reached the third entry guarding the stronghold, lines of geese honked by overhead.

Hua Rong thought: “Chao Gai is sceptical about my shooting the woollen tassels apart. If I don't show what I can do, in the future they won't respect me.”

He looked around. One of the attendants accompanying them carried a bow and arrows. Hua Rong asked the man for his bow. It was a fine weapon, with a gold grip incised with magpies, and suited perfectly to his taste. He quickly selected a good arrow.

“Some of you didn't seem to believe the story about my shooting the tangled tassels apart,” he said to Chao Gai. “A flight of geese is coming this way. I don't want to boast, but I'm going to put this arrow through the head of the third goose in line. Don't laugh at me if I miss.”

He notched the arrow to the string, pulled the bow to the full, aimed, and sent the feathered shaft winging into the sky. Sure enough, it hit the third bird and brought it tumbling to the slope below. Some soldiers were sent down after it. They returned with the goose, the arrow cleanly transfixing its skull.

Chao Gai and the others were amazed. They called Hua Rong the General with Miraculous Arms.

“None of the great bowmen of antiquity could match him,” said Wu Yong. “We're very fortunate to have him with us!”

From that day forward Hua Rong was respected by one and all in Liangshan Marsh. Now, they returned to the hall and feasted until late, after which, everyone retired.

The next day there was another banquet, and the order of precedence among the leaders was decided. Originally Qin Ming was before Hua Rong. But because he had married Hua Rong's younger sister he had to rank below him, in the sixth place, while Hua Rong took the fifth chair, right after Lin Chong. Liu Tang was seventh, Huang Xin eighth, followed by the three Ruan brothers, then Yan Shun, Stumpy Tiger Wang, Lu Fang, Guo Sheng, Zheng Tianshou, Shi Yong, Du Qian, Song Wan, Zhu Gui and Bai Sheng, in that order, a total of twenty-one leaders.

When the feasting and celebration had ended, more large boats and carts were built within the fortress area. Spearheads and other weapons were forged, armor and helmets made, banners, clothing, bows and arrows put in

order. The men of Mount Liangshan were preparing to repel government troops. Of this no more need be said.

Song Jiang travelled all night after leaving the tavern, and reached his own village late the following afternoon. He stopped to rest at the wine shop run by a ward chief named Zhang, who was on good terms with Song Jiang's family. Zhang observed his sorrowful expression and tear-filled eyes.

“You've been away for half a year, but today, fortunately, you've come home. Why are you looking so dejected? You ought to be happy. A general amnesty has been declared. Your crime surely has been reduced.”

“That may be true, uncle, but it's only of secondary importance. How can I help being distressed since my old father has passed away?”

Zhang laughed. “You're jesting. He was here drinking a short time ago. He's just gone back. Why are you talking like that?”

“Don't make fun of me, uncle.” Song Jiang showed him the letter. “My brother Song Qing has written here very plainly: Our father died early in the first lunar month. He urges me to come home and attend the funeral.”

“Nonsense. Nothing of the sort. He was drinking here at noon with Squire Wang of East Village. I wouldn't lie.”

Song Jiang didn't know what to say. His mind was filled with doubt. He thought for a long time. When it began getting dark, he said goodbye to the ward chief and hurried home. He entered the manor gate. All was peaceful. Vassals greeted him respectfully.

“Are my father and brother here?” he asked.

“The squire has been wearing out his eyes, looking for your return,” they said. “How fortunate that you've come back. He's just returned, himself. He was drinking with Squire Wang at Zhang's wine shop in the village. He's having a nap inside.”

Song Jiang was astonished. He threw aside the short cudgel and hurried into the thatched house. His younger brother Qing, seeing him, dropped to his knees and kowtowed. He was not wearing mourning. Song Jiang was enraged.

“How dare you, you monster! Father is alive and well. How could you write such a lying letter? I was ready to kill myself. I wept till I lost my senses. What sort of unfilial son are you!”

Before Song Qing could reply, Squire Song rounded a screen and emerged. “Calm yourself, son,” he said. “It's not your brother's fault. I was thinking of you every day, and I told him to write saying I had died, knowing that would bring you home quickly. I heard there are many robbers on White Tiger Mountain. I was afraid you might be inveigled into joining them and become a disloyal, unfilial person. So I sent the letter calling you home. When Shi Yong arrived from Lord Chai's place, he was deputed to deliver it. The idea was mine entirely. It had nothing to do with your brother. Don't blame him. I've just come back from Zhang's wine shop and was lying down inside when I heard that you'd returned.”

Torn between happiness and anger, Song Jiang kowtowed to his father. “Have you heard anything lately about the status of my case?” he asked. “An amnesty has been proclaimed. The charges against me are sure to be reduced. Ward Chief Zhang says the same thing.”

“Before your brother Qing came home, Constables Zhu Tong and Lei Heng did a lot for you. A 'Wanted' poster was put up, but no one came around to trouble me. Why have I summoned you home? The emperor has named his heir to the throne, and in celebration has issued a general amnesty. Charges on all major criminal acts have been lessened by one degree. The edict is already in force. If you were brought before a judge now, at worst you would be exiled, but you no longer could be punished by death. So let them do what they will. We'll find some way to cope.”

“Have Constables Zhu Tong and Lei Heng called here at the manor?”

“I heard the other day that they've been sent out on missions,” said Song Qing. “Zhu Tong has gone to the Eastern Capital. I don't know where Lei

Heng's been sent. But two new police officers have been added in the county town, both named Zhao.”

“You've had a long, hard journey, son,” said the old squire. “Why not go to your room and rest.”

It was a happy family reunion. Of that we'll say no more.

At dusk, the jade-rabbit moon appeared in the east. Less that a single watch later everyone in the manor was asleep. Suddenly, a loud clamor arose at the front and rear gates. On all sides torches surrounded the manor, and voices shouted: “Don't let Song Jiang get away!”

The old squire, hearing this, cried out bitterly.

And as a result, gallant heroes gathered on the bank of a river, in a market area loyalty and courage were manifested to the full.

How did Song Jiang escape from the manor? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 36
Wu Yong on Mount Liangshan Writes to Dai Zong
Song Jiang on Jieyang Ridge Meets Li Jun

Squire Song placed a ladder against the wall, climbed to the top and looked. Over a hundred men were outside with torches. At their head were two newly appointed Yuncheng County constable—the brothers Zhao Neng and Zhao De.

“If you know what's good for you, Squire Song,” these two now shouted, “you'll send your son Song Jiang out and let us deal with him. If you don't tell him to turn himself over to the authorities, we'll arrest the both of you!”

“Song Jiang hasn't come home,” the old man said.

“Don't lie,” Zhao Neng retorted. “He was seen drinking in the village at Ward Chief Zhang's place. And he was followed home from there. You can't deny it.”

“Don't argue with him, father,” Song Jiang urged, beside the ladder. “I'll go out and give myself up. I know everybody in the county office. What's more, an amnesty has been announced. I'm sure to be given a reduced sentence. It's no use pleading with these wretches. The Zhao brothers are a couple of rogues. Although they've suddenly got themselves appointed constables, they know nothing about gallantry. They're not friends of mine. Pleading with them is a waste of time.”

The old man wept. “I've harmed you, my son.”

“Calm yourself, father,” said Song Jiang. “Going before the court will be a good thing. Otherwise I might have taken to the hills and joined up with murderers and arsonists. Then if I were captured, I'd be ashamed to see you again. This way, I may be sent to another prefecture, but exile has a time limit. Sooner or later I'll come home and look after you in your old age.”

“All right, then. I'll spread some money among high and low and buy you a good place of exile.”

Song Jiang mounted the ladder and called: “Quiet down, out there. Leniency to my crime has already been declared. It's no longer a capital offence. If you two constables will come into our humble manor and have a few cups of wine with us, I'll go with you to the magistrate tomorrow.”

“You're not going to get us in there with any of your tricks,” Zhao Neng exclaimed.

“Would I implicate my own father and brother? Come in. You don't have to worry.”

Song Jiang came down from the ladder, opened the manor gate, and invited the two constables into the guest hall. That night they were wined and dined on chicken and goose. The hundred or more soldiers were also given food and drink, and each some money. Bars of silver worth twenty ounces were presented to the two constables as “thanks for their kindness.”

The constables spent the night in the manor, and at dawn the next day proceeded with Song Jiang to the county. When it was daylight, they brought him before Shi Wenbin, the magistrate, who had just opened court. The jurist was delighted. He ordered the prisoner to submit his confession. Song Jiang took a brush pen and wrote:

The crime occurred because last autumn I purchased Yan Poxi as a concubine. She was no good, and I accidentally killed her in a quarrel when I was drunk. I ran away to avoid being punished. Today, captured, and brought before the court, I set forth these details and state that I shall willingly accept whatever sentence the court decrees.

The magistrate read the confession and ordered Song Jiang remanded into custody.

Everyone in the county heard of Song Jiang's arrest, and there was not a person who didn't pity him. They pleaded with the magistrate to forgive

him, telling what a good man Song Jiang was ordinarily. The jurist was more than inclined to go easy. He formally accepted the confession and directed that Song Jiang be confined to the prison but that he need not be fettered.

Squire Song bribed high and low, dispensing money freely. Mistress Yan had died half a year before, so there was no aggrieved party in the case. Zhang Wenyuan, feeling that he had lost his mistress anyway, was unwilling to make an enemy of Song Jiang. The magistrate drew up his findings and, when the sixty-day detention period was over, sent the prisoner to the prefecture of Jizhou for sentencing.

The prefect reviewed the case, taking cognizance of the amnesty which lessened the severity of the crime. He directed that Song Jiang be given twenty strokes and exiled to the prison in Jiangzhou. Many of the officers and functionaries of the prefecture also knew Song Jiang, and besides, he dispensed a bit of money. Nominally, he was to be beaten twenty blows and tattooed with the mark of his exile. But there Was no aggrieved party to witness it being done, and many people supported him, so it was all inflicted very lightly. In the presence of the court a rack was placed around his neck for travelling and documents of transfer issued. Two guards were designated as escorts—Zhang and Li Something-or-Other.

On receipt of the documents, the guards set off with their prisoner. Song Jiang's father, Squire Song, and his brother, Song Qing, were waiting outside the prefectural compound. They served the guards wine and gave them silver. They brought Song Jiang a change of clothes, a pack to carry on his shoulders, and soft hemp sandals for walking. The squire took Song Jiang aside and spoke to him quietly:

“Jiangzhou is a good place, with plenty of fish and rice. I bought you an exile there. Serve out your sentence patiently. I'll have your brother Qing visit you. Whenever there's a reliable person going in your direction I'll send you expense money. You'll be passing Mount Liangshan on your way. If those brigands come down and rescue you and urge you to join their band, don't do it, or people will criticize you for being disloyal and unfilial. Don't forget what I have told you! May you have a peaceful journey, child. I

pray Heaven be merciful and that you return again soon for a happy reunion with your father and brother."

With tears in his eyes, Song Jiang bowed and bid farewell to the old man. His brother Qing saw him down the road. When it was time for them to part, Song Jiang said: "Don't any of you worry about me. My only concern is that father is getting old and I'm bedeviled by this case and have to leave home. Look after him. Don't leave him alone to come and see me in Jiangzhou. I have lots of friends in the gallant fraternity. Any of them will help me out with money if I need it. If Heaven is kind I'll be back one day."

Song Qing, weeping, bowed and departed. He returned home to look after his father, Squire Song. Of that we'll say no more.

Song Jiang proceeded along the road with the two guards. Because they had received his silver and knew that he was a gallant fellow, they looked after him on the journey. The three marched all day. At night, they put up at an inn, where they made a fire and cooked some rice. Song Jiang bought wine and meat and treated the guards.

"I'll be frank," he said. "From here on we'll be skirting Mount Liangshan. On the summit are a number of bold men who know my name. They might come down to rescue me and give you two a fright. I suggest we get up early tomorrow and follow small paths which detour around the mountain. Even if we have to travel a few extra *li* it'll be worth it."

"We'd never have known if you hadn't told us, sir Clerk," the guards replied. "We're familiar with a few paths. We definitely won't run into them there." Plans were made accordingly that night.

The three rose at the fifth watch the next morning and lit a breakfast fire. They soon left the inn, and walked along narrow trails for about thirty *li*. Suddenly a band of men appeared round the bend of the mountain ahead and advanced towards them.

Song Jiang groaned. Leading forty or fifty brigands was none other than Liu Tang the Red-Haired Demon. They plainly intended to finish off the two escorts. The terrified Zhang and Li collapsed to their knees in a heap.

“Brothers,” Song Jiang called, “who do you want to kill?”

“These two varlets, of course,” replied Liu Tang. “Who else?”

“Don't soil your hands. Give me your knife. I'll do it.”

The guards moaned. Liu Tang handed Song Jiang his blade.

“Why do you want to kill them?” Song Jiang asked.

“Our brothers on the mountain top sent a man to Yuncheng to inquire about your trial. At first we were going to snatch you from the jail, but we heard your situation wasn't too bad there. Then we learned you were being exiled to Jiangzhou. To make sure we didn't miss you, chiefs big and small have been posted on every road and path. We're here to welcome you and invite you up the mountain. Naturally, we've got to kill these guards.”

“This won't honor me, it will disgrace me. I'll become disloyal, unfilial. If you insist, I have no choice but to kill myself.” Song Jiang raised the blade to his throat.

Liu Tang grabbed his arm. “Wait, brother. Let's talk this over.” He wrested back the knife from Song Jiang's hand.

“Pity me, brothers,” Song Jiang pleaded. “Let me go on to Jiangzhou Prison. When my term is up I'll come back and we'll meet again.”

“That's not in my power to decide,” said Liu Tang. “On the main road ahead our Military Advisor Wu Yong and Commandant Hua Rong are waiting to greet you. If you'll allow me, I'll ask them to come and confer.”

“You can confer all you like. I've nothing more to say.”

A bandit was sent to report. Not long after, Wu Yong and Hua Rong were seen galloping towards them, followed by a dozen men on horseback. The two dismounted and bowed.

“Why hasn't the rack been removed?” Hua Rong demanded.

“What a thing to say,” Song Jiang remonstrated. “It's affixed according to government law. Who would dare touch it?”

Wu Yong laughed. “I see what you mean. No problem. We won't ask you to remain in our mountain stronghold, then. But Chieftain Chao Gai hasn't seen you in so long. He's hoping to have a private chat. Stay with us for a while, and we'll send you on your way.”

“Only you, Teacher, understand.” Song Jiang raised the two guards to their feet and said.

“Don't worry. I'd rather die than let them harm you.”

“We owe you our lives, sir Clerk,” they cried.

The column left the main road and came to a thicket of reeds along the bank. Boats were already waiting. They crossed over to the road on the other side and got into sedan-chairs. At Unity Pavilion they rested, and messengers were dispatched to ask the various lieutenants to assemble. Then all continued up the mountain to the Fraternity Hall. There, Chao Gai expressed his thanks to Song Jiang.

“Ever since you saved us at Yuncheng and we came here, there hasn't been a day that we haven't remembered your great kindness. What's more, you brought us several heroes to grace our humble lair. We don't know how to express our gratitude.”

“After leaving here, I killed a lecherous wench and wandered about for a year and a half. I intended to come back and see you, brother, but I ran into Shi Yong in a village inn. He had a letter from home, saying that my father had died. Actually, my father was afraid I'd join your band of gallant men, and was using this method to get me to return. Although I had to face trial, I was protected by officials high and low, and I wasn't hurt much. They exiled me to Jiangzhou, a good place. Since you summoned me, I had to come. Now we have met. But there's a time limit on my journey and I don't dare overstay. I must bid you farewell.”

“What's the hurry? Please sit a while, at least.”

The two took their seats in the center of the hall. Song Jiang told the two guards to sit behind his chair and not separate from him by an inch.

Chao Gai ordered his chieftains to pay their respects to Song Jiang and seat themselves in two rows. Lieutenants poured the wine. First Chao Gai drank to Song Jiang, followed by Wu Yong, Gongsun Sheng and Bai Sheng. After a few rounds, Song Jiang rose to his feet.

“Your affection touches me, brothers. I'm a criminal, a prisoner. I dare not remain. I must leave you, now.”

“You mustn't be annoyed with us, brother,” said Chao Gai. “Since you don't want us to create trouble for the two guards, why not give them some money and send them back. They can say the Liangshan Marsh men took you by force. It probably won't be considered their fault.”

“I won't hear of it. You're not honoring me, you're harming me. I haven't been filial to my old father at home for a single day. How can I go against his instructions and get him into trouble? Before, I wanted to join you, but Heaven ordained that Shi Yong should meet me in that village inn and cause me to go home. My father told me why he preferred that I should face trial. When I was ordered into exile, he exhorted me to shun personal happiness if it would hurt the family and bring distress to his declining years. He put it to me very plainly: 'Don't take the easy way. That would go against Heaven's principles and your father's teachings.' What's the point of my life if I become disloyal and unfilial? If you won't permit me to go down the mountain, I prefer to die at your hands!”

His tears streaming like rain, Song Jiang threw himself on his knees. Chao Gai, Wu Yong and Gongsun Sheng raised him.

“Since you're determined to go to Jiangzhou, brother,” they said, “relax and spend the day with us. We'll see you down the mountain tomorrow morning.”

After much persuasion he agreed to drink with them. But he refused to have his rack removed, and insisted that the guards remain with him all the time.

He spent the night, but rose early the next morning and announced that he was leaving.

“Hear me, brother,” said Wu Yong. “The superintendent of the two prisons in Jiangzhou is my very good friend. His name is Dai Zong, and he's called Superintendent Dai. Because he knows some Taoist magic and can walk eight hundred *li* in a day, everyone refers to him as 'the Marvellous Traveller.' He's extremely chivalrous and generous. Last night I wrote a letter of introduction for you. You two can become acquainted. If you need any help, send word to us here.”

The chieftains couldn't convince Song Jiang to stay, so they gave him a farewell banquet and gifts of silver and gold. They also presented the guards with twenty ounces of silver. With a man carrying Song Jiang's pack, all escorted him down the mountain. There, each took his leave. Wu Yong and Hua Rong accompanied him across the lake and twenty *li* along the toad. Then, they too returned to the mountain stronghold.

Song Jiang and the guards pushed on towards Jiangzhou. The guards had observed what a large force there was on the mountain, and how respectful the chieftains were to Song Jiang. Moreover, they had received the brigand leaders' silver. And so they were very solicitous to Song Jiang during the journey.

They marched more than half a month and came to a place where they could see a tall mountain ahead. “Good,” said the guards. “Jieyang Ridge. When we've crossed that we'll be at the Xunyang River. From there we go by water to Jiangzhou. It's not far.”

“It's going to be a hot day,” said Song Jiang. “Let's cross the ridge while it's still early and find a place to rest.”

“A good idea,” said the guards.

The three men hurried forward. They climbed for some time and traversed the crest. On the slope below they could see an inn backed against a cliff, with a strangely shaped tree at the door. Before and behind the building

were thatched huts. A wine pennant hanging in the shade of the tree gladdened Song Jiang's heart.

“We're hungry and thirsty and there's an inn that sells wine,” he said. “Let's have a few bowls before going on.”

Soon they entered the inn. The guards eased themselves of the luggage and leaned their official staves against the wall. Song Jiang had them sit at the head of the table while he himself sat at the foot. An hour passed and no one appeared.

“Host, where are you?” Song Jiang called.

“Coming, coming.” From an adjoining room a big fellow emerged. He had red bristly whiskers and bloodshot tiger eyes. A torn bandanna bound his head, bare arms protruded from a sleeveless vest, a cloth apron encircled his waist. He greeted the three respectfully.

“How much wine will you have, sirs?”

“We've been walking and we're hungry,” said Song Jiang. “What kind of meat have you?”

“Only cooked beef and some cloudy white wine.”

“Fine. Bring us two catties of sliced beef and a measure of wine.”

“Forgive me, sir, but here on the ridge we always collect in advance.”

“So you want your money first. I don't mind. Just a moment while I get you some silver.”

The host watched stealthily while Song Jiang opened his pack and took out some silver coins. He could see the pack was heavy and obviously contained things worth taking. Pleased, he accepted the coins, went inside, drew a bucket of wine and sliced a platter of beef. He came out, placed three large bowls and three pairs of chopsticks on the table and poured the wine. As the travellers ate, they chatted.

“There are many evil men around, these days,” one of them remarked. “It's said they've done in countless good fellows. They drug their wine and meat and, when their victims go down, steal their valuables and put their flesh into dumplings. It's incredible. How can such things happen?”

The host laughed. “You're the ones who've said it. Don't eat, then. My meat and wine are drugged.”

Song Jiang smiled. “Big brother has heard us talking about drugs and he's teasing us.”

“Brother,” said the guards, “we'd like a bowl of heated wine.”

“Right. I'll warm it up for you,” said the host. He heated the wine and poured out three bowls.

The travellers were hungry and thirsty and the meat and wine were before them. Why shouldn't they tuck in? Each man consumed a bowl. The eyes of the guards began to bulge, and they drooled from the corners of their mouths. Staring at each other, they toppled over backwards.

Song Jiang jumped up. “How can you be so drunk on only one bowl of wine?” He went to raise them to their feet, but suddenly he too felt dizzy and his eyes swam. He fell heavily to the floor.

The three stared at one another, paralyzed. They were unable to move.

“How lucky,” said the host. “I haven't had a speck of business in days, and now Heaven sends me these three pieces of merchandise.”

He dragged Song Jiang to the butchering hut beside the cliff and placed him on the skinning bench. Next, he hauled over the other two. Then be returned to the inn and carried Song Jiang's pack and luggage into the rear room and opened them up. They were filled with silver and gold.

“In all the years I've been running this inn I've never seen a prisoner like him. Where did he get so much money? It's a gift from the sky!”

He rewrapped the bundles and went outside to watch for the return of his helpers so that he could start butchering.

He stood by the door for a while, but there was no sign of them. Further down the slope he saw three men climbing rapidly towards him. Recognizing one of them, he hurried forward. “Where to, brother?” he hailed in greeting. A big fellow replied: “We're looking for a man. He should be coming this way by now. I've been waiting for him every day at the foot of the mountain, but he hasn't shown up. I can't imagine what's delaying him.”

“Who is he?”

“A remarkable and chivalrous person.”

“And who would that be?”

“The clerk of Yuncheng County in the prefecture of Jizhou, Song Jiang. Surely, you've heard of him?”

“Not Song Jiang of Shandong Province, famed in the gallant fraternity as the Timely Rain?”

“None other.”

“Why would he be coming here?”

“I don't know. The other day I met a friend from Jizhou and he said: 'Song Jiang, the clerk of Yuncheng County, has got into some kind of trouble in Jizhou and has been exiled to the prison in Jiangzhou.' He's got to pass this way. There isn't any other road. I often thought of going to Yuncheng to meet him. Now, he's coming through here. Why shouldn't I take this chance to become acquainted? I've been waiting at the foot of the mountain for four or five days, but no prisoner has appeared. Today I've come for a stroll up the ridge with these two brothers. I thought we'd have a bowl of wine here and see how you are. What's business like these days?”

“Frankly, it's been practically dead the past few months. Today, thank Heaven and Earth, I've caught three pieces of merchandise, and they've got some stuff on them.”

“Who are they?” the big fellow asked quickly.

“Two are guards and the third is a prisoner.”

“Is the prisoner a dark, short, chunky man?” the big fellow queried in alarm.

“It's true he is not very tall, and he's rather dark complected.”

“You haven't gone to work on him yet?” the big fellow asked hastily.

“I dragged him into the shed only a short while ago. I can't start till my helpers get back.”

“Let me take a look at him first.”

The four men entered the butchering shed beside the cliff. Song Jiang and the two guards were draped over the skinning bench, lying with their heads touching the ground. The big fellow didn't know Song Jiang. He examined the tattoo on his cheek, but it wasn't clear. The big fellow didn't know what to do. Suddenly he had an idea.

“Get the guards' pack and we can read his documents.”

“The very thing,” said the host. They went into the house, obtained the guards' bundle and opened it up. In it were a large bar of silver, several silver coins and a document case. The contents of the latter were carefully examined.

“A lucky thing,” the four men exclaimed.

“Heaven sent me up this ridge, today. If you'd set to work a little earlier you'd have taken my brother's life,” the big fellow cried. “Give him something quickly to bring him out of it.”

The host hastily prepared a herbal mixture. Then he and the big fellow returned to the butcher shed, removed Song Jiang's rack, lifted him up and poured the concoction down his throat.

The four then carried Song Jiang to the front part of the inn reserved for guests. With the big fellow holding him, he slowly revived and opened his eyes. He didn't recognize any of the men standing before him. The big fellow asked his two friends to support Song Jiang, and he dropped to his knees and kowtowed.

“Who are you?” Song Jiang asked. “I must be dreaming.” The host also kowtowed.

“What is this place?” queried Song Jiang. “May I ask your names, sirs?”

“My name is Li Jun,” the big fellow said, “from Luzhou. I earn my living as a helmsman on Yangzi River ships. Because I'm a good swimmer I'm known as the Turbulent River Dragon. Our host here is a native of Jieyang Ridge. He's a smuggler. His name is LiLi, but everyone calls him Hell's Summoner. These two are from the banks of the Xunyang. They're here to sell smuggled salt. That's their specialty. Right now, they're living with me. They're brothers, and swim and handle boats well on the big Yangzi. Tong Wei is called the Dragon from the Cave. Tong Meng is called the River Churning Clam.”

Each of the brothers kowtowed four times. “But I was knocked out by drugs,” said Song Jiang. “How did you know my name?”

“A friend of mine who has just been Jizhou on business told me about you,” Li Jun replied. “He said you were being sent to the prison in Jiangzhou. I'd often thought of going to your county to pay my respects, but I never was fortunate enough to have the chance. When I heard you were going to Jiangzhou I knew you would have to pass here. I've been waiting for you at the foot of the mountain for six or seven days, but you didn't show up. Today, Heaven happened to send me and these two brothers up the ridge. We stopped in for some wine and got to talking with LiLi. I was startled by his story and hurried to the butchering shed. We hadn't met before, but I suddenly thought of your documents, and that's how I knew it was you,

brother. May I have the temerity to ask why the clerk of Yuncheng County is being sent to Jiangzhou prison?”

Song Jiang told what had happened from the time he killed Yan Poxi to when he was given the letter by Shi Yong in the village inn, returned home, stood trial and was exiled to Jiangzhou. His four listeners sighed.

“Why not stay here?” asked LiLi the host. “Why go to prison and suffer hardships?”

“The men on Mount Liangshan begged me to remain with them, but I refused because I was afraid to implicate my father,” Song Jiang explained. “How can I stay with you?”

“Our brother is a man of principle,” Li Jun said to the host. “He won't do anything wrong. Now you'd better revive those guards.”

By then LiLi's helpers had returned, and he ordered them to carry the guards into the section for guests. The antidote was administered and the drugged escorts awakened. They gazed at each other blearily.

“We must have been tired from the walk to have got drunk so easily.”

The others all laughed.

That evening LiLi gave a feast and they spent the night at the inn. The next day he wined and dined them again, and returned the luggage to Song Jiang and the guards. Li Jun and the Tong brothers accompanied the travellers down the mountain. They stopped to rest at Li Jun's house, where he served food and wine. He entertained Song Jiang solicitously, and they pledged each other as blood brothers.

After several days Song Jiang was determined to continue his journey, in spite of Li Jun's urgings to stay. Li Jun gave the escorts some silver, and Song Jiang again put on his rack, gathered his luggage and bid farewell to Li Jun, Tong Wei and Tong Meng. Leaving Jieyang Ridge, he and the guards proceeded towards Jiangzhou.

They marched for some time. Early in the afternoon they came to a bustling market town. Attracted by a crowd, Song Jiang pushed his way through and saw that they were watching a wandering medicine seller putting on a display with weapons. Song Jiang and the guards halted and joined the audience. The man first showed his skill with a lance. Then, he set that down and gave a demonstration of unarmed combat.

“Excellent,” Song Jiang exclaimed.

The man picked up a tray and addressed the crowd. “I've come to your honorable town from afar to ply my trade,” he said. “There's nothing starling about my talent. I rely entirely on your good will. Though I've been praised in distant places, you can see that I'm a mere juggler. I'm selling plasters for injured muscles and bones. If you've no need for them, bestow a few silver coins or coppers, so that my journey here will not have been in vain.”

He passed the tray around, but no one gave him any money. “Gentlemen, be generous,” he pleaded. Again he passed the tray. His audience only stared. They donated not a copper.

Song Jiang could see that the man was upset. He told the guards to give him five ounces of silver. “Arms instructor,” he said, “I'm only a criminal and can't offer anything worthwhile. But take these five bits of silver as token of my esteem. Please don't scorn them as too few.”

With the coins in his hand the man said: “In all of famous Jieyang Town there is not one gallant able to recognize my abilities. Only this gentleman, himself under penalty of the law, passing by, presents me with five pieces of silver. How true the verse:

People once laughed at Zheng Yuanbe

For dallying in the Houses of Joy,

But wealth is no mark of nobility,

Nor do clothes in abundance prove chivalry.

These five pieces of silver are worth more to me than fifty. I bow to you, sir. Please tell me your name, that I may spread it everywhere."

"A few paltry coins don't amount to anything, Arms Instructor. There's no need to thank me."

While they were talking, a big fellow parted the crowd and charged towards them. "You varlet," he shouted. "Who is this knave of a prisoner who dares to sully my prestige in Jieyang Town!" Raising both fists, he rushed at Song Jiang.

Because of this a fight ensued, and as a result dragons churned waves in the Xunyang River, fierce tigers climbed heights in Liangshan Marsh.

Who was this fellow who attacked Song Jiang? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 37
Unrestrained Mu Chases Timely Rain
Xunyang River Boatmen Riot in the Night

"Just because he can do a few friggin tricks with a lance, he thinks he can throw his weight around," the big fellow shouted, glaring. "I've ordered everyone to ignore him, but you, rogue, have to show off that you have money and give him silver. You're trying to weaken my power in this town!"

"Suppose I gave him a bit of silver. What's it to you?"

The big fellow seized Song Jiang. "Thief of an exile. You dare talk back to me!"

"Why not!"

The big fellow swung both fists at Song Jiang's face. Song Jiang ducked. Once again the big man charged. Song Jiang was all set. But then the arms instructor dashed in from behind the crowd, grabbed the assailant by head kerchief and waist and, with a poke in the ribs and a quick twist, slammed him to the ground. He struggled to rise. The arms instructor knocked him flat with a swift kick. The two guards intervened to restrain the fighting medicine man. The big fellow managed to crawl to his feet. He looked at Song Jiang and the arms instructor.

“If you think you can get away with this, just wait!” He strode off in a southerly direction.

“May I ask your name and place of origin?” Song Jiang politely queried the medicine man.

“My ancestral home is Luoyang, in Henan Province, and my name is Xue Yong. My paternal grandfather was an officer in the headquarters of Old General Zhong. But he offended some of the senior bureaucrats and so never rose in rank. His sons and grandsons have been forced to earn their living with displays of arms and selling medicines. In the gallant fraternity I'm known as the Sick Tiger. Dare I enquire who you are, sir?”

“Song Jiang is my name. My ancestral home is Yuncheng County.”

“Not Song Jiang the Timely Rain from Shandong Province?”

“The same.”

Xue Yong dropped to his knees and kowtowed. Song Jiang hastily raised him to his feet.

“Let's have a few cups together, what do you say?”

“Fine. I've been longing to meet you, but I never could find an opportunity.” The arms instructor gathered his weapons and medicines and went with Song Jiang to a nearby wine shop.

“We have meat and wine,” said the proprietor, “but I don't dare sell you any.”

“Why not?” asked Song Jiang.

“That big fellow you were fighting with just sent word that if I do he'll smash my shop to pieces. I can't go against his wishes. He's the boss of this town. Who dares oppose him?”

“In that case we'll leave. The scoundrel is sure to be looking for an excuse for another quarrel.”

“Let me go back to my inn and pay what I owe. I'll look you up in Jiangzhou in a day or two. You go on ahead, brother,” said Xue Yong.

Song Jiang gave him twenty pieces of silver and they parted. The clerk and the two guards walked until they came to another wine shop. “The Young Master has given orders,” said the host. “We can't sell you anything. It's useless to ask.”

Song Jiang and the guards had nothing to say. They tried several more shops, and in each one they got the same answer. At the edge of the town were several small inns, where they tried to put up for the night. None of the hostels would accept them. When Song Jiang asked why, they said the Young Master had given definite orders: “Don't let those three in.”

Obviously, there was no use talking. They continued on towards the main highway. The red ball of the sun was low in the sky and dusk was falling. The three travellers began to get worried.

“Just because we watched a display of arms we offended that brute,” they said. “Now there are no inns or villages in sight. Where are we going to sleep?”

They saw lights gleaming through a grove of trees in the distance at the end of a small path. “People must be living there,” said Song Jiang. “We can beg their pardon and ask them to let us stay the night. In the morning we'll go on.”

“Those lights are well off the main road.”

“What else can we do? We may have to walk an extra two or three *li* tomorrow, but what of it?”

They travelled about two *li* and there among the trees was a large manor. They rapped on the gate and a vassal opened it.

“Who are you, knocking at this late hour?”

“I'm a prisoner on my way to Jiangzhou,” Song Jiang said apologetically. “We've gone beyond where we originally intended to spend the night and we've no place to stay. We hope your manor will put us up. We'll pay whatever's customary in the morning.”

“Wait here. I'll ask the squire. If he agrees, you can stay.” The vassal went inside. He soon returned. “The squire says please come in.” He led the three to a thatched building.

The squire told the vassal to quarter them in the gate-house and give them supper. The gate-house also had a thatched roof. The vassal lit a lamp and told the three visitors to rest. He fetched three portions of rice and soup and vegetables and bid them eat. When they had finished he cleared the table and departed.

“We're alone here, sir Clerk,” said the guards. “We'll take off your rack and all have a comfortable night's sleep and set out early in the morning.”

“Good,” said Song Jiang.

The rack was removed and he and the two guards went out to relieve themselves. Song Jiang gazed at the star-filled sky and at the rustic lane running behind the houses on the edge of the threshing ground. He made a mental note of it. They returned to the gate-house, bolted the door and lay down to sleep. They agreed that it was kind of the squire to let them stay.

Suddenly they heard voices on the threshing ground. Song Jiang peered out through a crack in the door. The squire and three vassals were looking the

manor over in the light of their torches.

“Just like my father,” Song Jiang said to the guards. “He won't retire till he's checked everything personally.”

At that moment someone outside the manor shouted: “Open the gate.” Vassals complied, and six or seven men entered. The fellow in the lead gripped a halberd, those behind him carried pitchforks and clubs. Song Jiang could see them plainly in the torchlight.

“That one with the halberd is the man who attacked us in town,” he said.

He heard the squire ask: “Where have you been, son? Who have you been fighting with, coming home so late bristling with arms?”

“You don't know what's been going on, father,” the big fellow replied. “Is elder brother at home?”

“He's drunk. He's sleeping it off in the rear house.”

“I'll get him up. I need him to help me chase a man.”

“You've been quarrelling again. If you get your brother, you know he'll go to extremes. What's wrong? Tell me.”

“A weapons-twirling medicine man came to town today and put his show on without asking permission first from brother and me. I ordered that no one was to give him a penny. But along came a prisoner and, just to show off, gave the fellow five pieces of silver. That was one in the eye for our prestige! I went to knock the prisoner around a bit, and that wretched medicine pedlar threw me down and hit and kicked me. My middle still hurts. I sent men around to tell all the wine shops and inns not to serve those louts or put them up. They'll have no place to stay tonight. Then I had a gang from the gambling den go down to the inn where that medicine man was staying and drub him. I've got him tied in the arms master's house now. Tomorrow, I'll take him down to the river, bind him hand and foot, and toss him in. That'll pay him off! But I can't find the prisoner those two guards are with. There aren't any inns ahead where he can stay. I don't know where

he's found shelter. I want to get brother, divide into two parties and track the rascal down!”

“Don't be churl, son. Suppose he gave silver to the medicine seller. What is that to you? Why did you attack him? You ended up being beaten yourself. But you weren't hurt badly. Listen to me—forget it. If your brother hears you've been beaten, he won't quit till he's killed someone again. Take my advice—go into the house and sleep. The middle of the night is no time to go knocking on people's doors and upsetting all the villagers. Try earning a few good marks for your next incarnation.”

The big fellow paid no attention. Grasping his halberd, he went inside the manor, with the old man following behind.

“What an unlucky coincidence,” Song Jiang said to the guards. “This is bad. Taking shelter in his manor! We'd better leave. He'll kill us if he finds out we're here. Even if the squire doesn't say anything, the vassals won't dare to conceal it from him.”

“You're right. We must get away without delay.”

“No use trying to leave by the front gate. We'll dig our way out through the manor wall behind this house.”

The guards toting the luggage and Song Jiang carrying his rack, they slipped around to the rear of the house and dug a hole in the manor wall. Then they fled along a path in the starlight towards the depths of the grove.

They pushed on blindly for about a watch. Ahead they saw a thicket of reeds and a large body of roiling water. They had reached the banks of the Xunyang River. They heard voices behind them and shrill whistling, and saw the bobbing of many torches.

“Heaven save me,” Song Jiang cried.

The three men hid in the reeds and watched the torches draw nearer. Very alarmed, they floundered around in a panic. There was no escape. Before them was the large river, on either side were broad coves.

Song Jiang raised his head to the sky and lamented: “If I'd known it was going to be like this I'd have stayed on Mount Liangshan. Who'd have thought I'd meet my end here!”

Suddenly, gliding through the reeds, a boat appeared. “Over here, boatman,” Song Jiang called. “Save us. I'll give you silver.”

“Who are you three?” the boatman queried. “What are you doing here?”

“We're being chased by robbers, and jumped into these reeds. Come quickly and ferry us across. I'll pay you extra.”

At that promise, the boatman moved his craft up and the three clambered on board. One of the guards threw the luggage into the hold, the other poled the boat with his official staff. The boatman plied the sweep-oar in the stern. The clinking of the bag's contents as they struck the boards filled him with secret satisfaction. Soon the little craft was well out in the center of the river.

The pursuers had by then reached the shore. There were a dozen torches among them. The two big men in the lead held halberds. Their twenty or more followers were armed with lances.

“Boatman,” they called, “row over here.”

Song Jiang and guards, huddled in the hold, said: “Don't do it. We'll give you more silver.”

The boatman nodded. He ignored the gang on the bank and plied his creaking oar.

“If you don't bring your boat here,” the pursuers threatened, “we'll kill every one of you.”

The boatman laughed coldly, but did not reply.

“You dare disobey?” bawled the gang on the bank.

“I'm Zhang the Boatman. Stop your friggin yelling,” the rower replied with a grin.

The biggest man among the torches changed his tune. “Oh, it's you, brother Zhang. Didn't you see us two brothers here?”

“Of course. I'm not blind.”

“Come back, then. We want to talk to you.”

“We'll talk tomorrow. My passengers are in a hurry.”

“Those three on your boat are the ones my brother and I are after!”

“They're relatives of mine. They're food and clothing to me. I've invited them out for a bowl of 'deck knife noodles'.”

“Row back. We'll talk about it.”

“Turn my food and clothing over to you? Fat chance!”

“Don't say that, brother Zhang. We only want the prisoner. Bring him here.”

The boatman continued plying his oar. “I haven't had a passenger in days. I'm not going to row him back and give him to you. Forgive me. See you again some time.”

Song Jiang didn't understand his hidden meaning. He whispered to the guards: “How lucky we met this boatman. He's saved our lives and stuck up for us. We won't forget his kindness. Where would we be if it weren't for this boat to ferry us across?”

The boatman rowed on. Soon they were far from the shore. Sitting in the hold, they could see the torches gleaming in the reeds.

“What good fortune,” Song Jiang said. “How true it is that 'When good folk meet, evil men keep their distance.' We've managed to escape disaster.”

As he plied his oar, the boatman sang a Huzhou tune, with his own words:

Born and raised on the river's edge,

Towards officials and Heaven I'm fearless and bold.

Last night demon Hua Guang tried to do me in,

Before he left I snatched his brick of gold!

Song Jiang and the guards felt their bones go soft with fright. But then Song Jiang thought: “He's only jesting.” While the three men were discussing this new development, the boatman put down his oar.

“You, prick, and you two police guards, it's your kind who are always squeezing us smugglers. Today you've fallen into my hands. What would you rather eat—'deck knife noodles' or 'dumplings in soup'?”

“Don't joke, sir,” said Song Jiang. “What do you mean?”

The boatman glared. “Who's joking! If it's 'deck knife noodles' you want, I've a blade beneath this deck which can slice the wind. I don't need three or four slashes. One cut each will dump you dead in the water. If it's 'dumplings' you prefer, take your clothes off and jump into the river naked as dumplings and drown yourselves!”

Song Jiang clutched the guards. “Woe is me,” he cried. “How true is that 'Luck comes but once, but trouble comes in droves'.”

“Talk it over and give me an answer, quick,” barked the boatman.

“We didn't come here of our own choice,” Song Jiang pleaded. “I committed a crime and am being exiled to Jiangzhou. Have pity. Spare our lives.”

“You're wasting breath. Spare you three? Not even half a man shall be spared! I'm Dog-Faced Master Zhang. Father or mother mean nothing to

me. Shut your friggin mouths and get into the water!”

“Our gold and silver and valuables and clothes—you can have them all. Only let us live!”

From beneath the deck boards the boatman took out a gleaming cutlass. “What shall it be?” he shouted.

Song Jiang raised his face to the sky and sighed. “Because I failed in respect to Heaven and Earth, was unfilial to my parents and committed a crime, I've implicated you two.”

The guards gripped his arms. “Say no more, sir Clerk. We'll die together and that will be the end of it.”

“Off with your clothes and into the river,” roared the boatman. “Jump, or I'll hack you in!”

Huddled together, the three men stared at the water. They heard the creaking of oars, and the boatman looked quickly around. Flying towards them was a light craft. A big man with a trident stood on the prow. Two young fellows were wielding sweep-oars in the stern. In the starlight the vessel drew rapidly near.

“Ahoy,” the big man with the trident hailed. “Who dares to operate in our waters? Any merchandise you have on board you'll have to share with us!”

“So it's you, brother Li,” the boatman exclaimed hastily. “I couldn't imagine who it was. Out on business, brother? Why didn't you take me along?”

“So you're at it again, brother Zhang. What have you got there? Anything worthwhile?”

“You'll laugh when I tell you. I haven't had any business for days. I lost at gambling again and was left without a copper. I was sitting gloomily off the reef when a gang chased three pieces of merchandise right into my boat. Two friggin guards and a swarthy short prisoner. I don't know who he is. Claims he's been exiled to Jiangzhou, but he doesn't have any rack around

his neck. The gang after him was led by those two Mu brothers from our town. They really wanted him. But when I saw there was something to be got out of him I wouldn't give him up."

"Whew! Could that be my brother Song Jiang?"

The man's voice sounded familiar. From the hold Song Jiang called: "Who are you, bold fellow? Save me! I'm Song Jiang!"

"My brother, sure enough," the big man exclaimed, startled. "Why didn't you speak up?"

Song Jiang hurried out on deck. The starlight was very bright, and he saw that the man on the prow was Li Jun the Turbulent River Dragon and that the two in the stern with the sweep-oars were Tong Wei the Dragon from the Cave and Tong Meng the River Churning Clam.

Li Jun leaped on board. "You've had a fright, brother! If I came a little later you'd have been a goner. Thank Heaven I was bored and restless at home and came out in my boat to do some salt smuggling. I never dreamed I'd find you in this predicament."

The boatman was stupefied, speechless. Finally he asked: "Brother Li, you mean this swarthy fellow is Song Jiang the Timely Rain from Shandong?"

"Of course."

Dropping to his knees, the boatman kowtowed. "Just your name, sir, would have stopped me from doing an evil deed! I nearly took your life!"

"Who is this good fellow?" Song Jiang asked Li Jun. "What is his name?"

"He's a blood brother of mine, from Little Lone Mountain. His name is Zhang Heng, and he's known as the Boat Flame. His specialty is conducting this 'quiet and respectable' business on the Xunyang River."

Song Jiang and the guards laughed. The two boats were rowed together to the bank and moored, and Song Jiang and his escorts were helped ashore.

“I've often told you, brother,” Li Jun said to Zhang Heng, “of all the gallant men under the sky, there's none to compare with Clerk Song, the Timely Rain of Yuncheng Town. Today you can examine him closely.”

Zhang Heng struck his flint, lit a lantern and peered at Song Jiang. He threw himself down on the sand and again kowtowed. “Brother, please forgive me!” Then he asked: “Gallant brother, why have you been exiled here?”

Li Jun related the story of Song Jiang's crime, adding: “He's being sent to Jiangzhou.”

“There's something I must tell you,” Zhang Heng said to the clerk. “My mother bore two sons—me and my younger brother, Zhang Shun. He's a remarkable boy, with skin as white as snow. Not only can he swim forty or fifty *li* on the surface of the water, he can stay below for seven days and seven nights. Because he's like a white streak in the water and because he's so skilled with arms, he's been nicknamed White Streak in the Waves. At one time he and I were doing quite a business on the Yangzi.”

“I'd like to hear about it.”

“Whenever we lost at gambling, I would take our boat to a quiet shore and ferry people across the river. Travellers who wanted to save money and get to the other side quickly would board my craft. When I was full up, my brother Zhang Shun would come along, disguised as a passenger also, with a large bundle on his back. I'd row to the center of the river, stop, cast anchor, take out a big cutlass and demand passage money. My agreed price had been five hundred coppers, but I demanded three thousand. I asked my brother, first, and he pretended to refuse. Grabbing him by neck and waist, I threw him kaplunk into the water. Then I went to each of the others for my three thousand. They were all scared stiff. Every one of them paid up. After I collected, I delivered them to a secluded spot on the opposite shore. My brother had already swum underwater and reached the bank. As soon as the passengers were gone, he joined me, we divided the money and went gambling. That was how we earned our living.”

“There must have been plenty of customers along the river who sought you for trips like that,” said Song Jiang.

Li Jun and the others laughed.

“My brother and I are in a different line of business now,” Zhang Heng went on. “We're smugglers on the Xunyang. Zhang Shun has gone to Jiangzhou Town today to sell some fish fry. Look him up when you get there. I'd give you a letter to him, only I can't write.”

“We'll find a scribe in the village,” said Li Jun. He instructed the Tong brothers to stay and watch the boats.

Li Jun and Zhang Heng, carrying a lantern, led Song Jiang and guards in the direction of the village. Before they had travelled half a *li* they saw that torches were still gleaming brightly upon the river bank.

“Those two brothers haven't gone back yet,” said Zhang Heng.

“Who do you mean?” asked Li Jun.

“The two brothers of the Mu family in our town.”

“Call them to pay their respects to our brother, here:”

“You mustn't do that,” Song Jiang said quickly. “They're the ones who were chasing me.”

“Don't worry,” said Li Jun. “They didn't know it was you. They're one of us.” He waved his hand and whistled, once.

The torch-bearing men came running towards them. When the Mu brothers saw Li Jun and Zhang Heng in polite conversation with Song Jiang, they halted, surprised.

“Are you two brothers familiar with these three?” they asked.

Li Jun laughed. “Do you know who this is?”

“No. He went against our authority in town and gave money to that medicine man. It damaged our prestige, so we've been after him.”

“He's the one I've often told you about—brother Song Jiang, clerk of Yuncheng County, Shandong, known as the Timely Rain. Hurry and greet him.”

The Mu brothers cast their halberds aside and kowtowed. “We've long heard of your fame. Who'd have thought we'd meet today? We behaved rashly and injured you, brother. Please forgive us.”

Song Jiang helped them to their feet. “Your names, bold warriors?”

“They're from a well-to-do family, local people,” Li Jun said. “Mu Hong, the older brother, is called the Unrestrained. Mu Chun, the younger, is called the Slightly Restrained. They run Jieyang Town. You may not know this, brother, but we have three powers around here. I'll explain. On Jieyang Ridge and below, LiLi and I run things. In the town, the Mu brothers are boss. Zhang Heng and Zhang Shun control all the smuggling along the Xunyang River. That's what we mean by the 'Three Powers'.”

“We had no idea,” said Song Jiang. “Since we're brothers, I must beg you to release Xue Yong.”

Mu Hong smiled. “The lance twirler? No problem.” To Mu Chun he said: “Get him and return him to our brother, here.” He turned again to Song Jiang. “Please come to our humble manor to receive our courtesies and forgive our wrongs.”

“Excellent,” said Li Jun. “Excellent. We'll all go.”

Mu Hong sent two vassals to watch the boats and invite the Tong brothers to join them. He directed another man to go on ahead and inform the manor to prepare food and wine, slaughter a sheep and a pig, and lay a feast. When Tong Wei and Tong Meng arrived, all walked together. They reached the manor around the fifth watch. Squire Mu was requested to greet his visitors, then they took their seats as hosts and guests in the thatched hall. Song Jiang sat opposite the squire.

They had not been chatting long when the sky began to lighten. Mu Chun arrived with Xue Yong the Sick Tiger, and he was introduced to everyone.

Mu Hong feasted Song Jiang and the others until evening, at which time all retired.

The next day Song Jiang wanted to leave, but Mu Hong wouldn't hear of it. He insisted that his visitors remain. He took Song Jiang on a stroll through town and showed him the sights of the surrounding villages.

After the third day Song Jiang, afraid he would exceed the time limit for his arrival at the prison, was determined to go. When the pleas of Mu Hong and the others proved in vain, a farewell feast was laid. The following morning Song Jiang bid farewell to the squire and the assembled gallants.

“Remain here a while with Mu Hong,” he urged Xue Yong. “Then come to Jiangzhou and we'll meet again.”

“Don't worry, brother,” said Mu Hong. “I'll take good care of him.” He presented Song Jiang with gold and silver on a platter and gave each of the guards some money.

A scribe in the manor wrote a letter for Zhang Heng which he requested Song Jiang to deliver to his brother Zhang Shun. Song Jiang put it in his bundle. Everyone saw him to the edge of the Xunyang where Mu Hong summoned a boat and put Song Jiang's luggage and rack on board. They drank a parting toast, and there were tears in everyone's eyes as they bid him farewell. Li Jun, Zhang Heng, Mu Hong, Mu Chun, Xue Yong, Tong Wei and Tong Meng returned to their respective homes. Of that no more need be said.

Song Jiang and guards embarked for Jiangzhou. This boatman was different from their previous one. He raised a sail and soon delivered them to their destination. Song Jiang wore the rack around his neck once more. The guards, carrying his documents and bearing the luggage, proceeded with him to the office of the Jiangzhou prefectural government.

The prefect was holding court. His name was Cai Dezhang and he was the ninth son of Cai Jing, the premier. For this reason he was known in Jiangzhou as Prefect Cai the Ninth. An avaricious official, he was pompous

and rude. The premier had seen to it that he was appointed to this post because Jiangzhou was a populous wealthy city.

The guards handed him the documents and produced Song Jiang. He could see that the prisoner was no ordinary man. “Why is there no prefectural seal on your rack?” he demanded.

“We were caught in the rain on the road, and it washed off,” the guards explained.

“Write a statement about that immediately and take him to the prison outside the city. I will send prefectural guards with you.”

The prefect designated two men, who took the statement from the two original guards, then all five left the court and stopped for some refreshments in a wine shop outside the prefecture. Song Jiang gave the Jiangzhou escorts three ounces of silver. They delivered him to the prison, obtained a receipt and placed him in a single cell. They had put in a good word for him with the warden and the head keeper. Then they returned with their receipt to the Jiangzhou prefectural office.

The two original guards turned Song Jiang's luggage over to him, thanked him a thousand times and went back to the city. “Although we had a bad fright,” they said, “we earned lots of silver.” They reported to the Jiangzhou prefectural office, were given an official reply, and set out on the return journey to Jizhou.

Song Jiang invited the head keeper to his cell and gave him ten ounces of silver. He also sent the same amount to the warden, plus gifts. Nor did he forget to tip the others working in the prison and the soldiers on guard. All got silver for tea money. As a result, he was well liked.

Not long after, he was brought to the registration room and his rack removed. The warden, who had taken the bribe, said: “Song Jiang, you have just arrived and I must tell you this. Wu De, the founding emperor, decreed that all newly exiled prisoners shall be beaten a hundred strokes to quell their arrogance. Guards, turn him face down.”

“I caught a heavy cold on the road,” said Song Jiang, “and I still haven't recovered.”

The warden nodded. “The prisoner really does look sick. See how sallow and thin he is. Just credit him with a beating on the books. This fellow was a county functionary. Let him work as a copyist.”

A written order to this effect was immediately issued, and Song Jiang expressed his thanks. He collected his luggage from his cell and moved into the Copying Section. The other prisoners, seeing that he was getting special treatment, bought wine and held a small party to congratulate him. The next day Song Jiang gave them a party in return. From time to time he invited the head keeper and guards in for drinks, and he often sent gifts to the warden. He had plenty of money and valuables and that made it easy for him to approach people. Before half a month had gone by there wasn't a man in the prison who didn't think well of him.

“Guide your actions by the moods of the powerful, treat a man according to his status,” as the old saying goes. One day Song Jiang was drinking with the head keeper in the Copying Section.

“Brother,” the head keeper said, “I reminded you recently that it's the custom here to send the prison superintendent gifts. Why have you delayed so long? It's more than ten days already. He'll be coming soon, and it will be awkward.”

“Never mind. He wants money, but I won't give him any. You, brother, can ask me any time you need some. But I won't give that superintendent a copper. I have something to say to him when he comes.”

“He's very fierce, sir Clerk, and a demon with his hands and feet. If you offend him and he gets rough, don't say I didn't warn you.”

“He can do as he likes. But don't worry. I can handle him. Maybe I'll give him something, maybe not. Perhaps he'll be afraid to ask me. It's hard to say.”

While they were talking, a guard came in and reported: “The superintendent is here. He's in the hall, furious. 'Why hasn't that new prisoner sent me the usual money gift?' he's yelling.”

“What did I tell you?” said the head keeper. “Even we're afraid when he comes.”

Song Jiang smiled. “Forgive me, brother. I can't keep you company any longer. We'll drink again another day. I must go and speak to him.”

The head keeper rose. “We don't want to see him!” Song Jiang said farewell and went from the Copying Section to the Registration Hall where the superintendent was waiting.

And because they met, Jiangzhou Town was turned into a den of tigers and a lair of wolves. Street corners became mountains of corpses and seas of blood. Men broke Heaven's mesh and Earth's net, and returned to Liangshan Marsh.

What happened when Song Jiang and the superintendent met? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 38
Timely Rain Meets the Marvellous Traveller
Black Whirlwind Fights White Streak in the Waves

Seated on a bench in the Registration Room the superintendent was shouting: “Where is the new exiled prisoner?”

The guard pointed at Song Jiang. “That's him.”

“You swarthy sawed-off bait for the executioner,” roared the superintendent. “Who's backing you that you dare withhold my money?”

“Gifts must be given willingly,” Song Jiang retorted. “They can't be forced. You're very petty.”

The men watching from both sides, hearing this, broke into a cold sweat.

“Thief of an exile,” the superintendent raged. “You have the temerity to call me petty. Guards, turn this rogue up and give him a hundred strokes of the persuader!”

Everyone in the prison was on good terms with Song Jiang. When the order was given to beat him, they all departed hurriedly, leaving him and the superintendent alone. The superintendent was furious. He grabbed the persuader staff and rushed towards Song Jiang.

“What crime have I committed that you want to beat me?” Song Jiang queried.

“Thief of an exile, you're completely in my hands. I can treat your slightest cough as a crime!”

“You're just picking fault. It's not that serious. I haven't committed any capital offense.”

“You haven't, eh?” the superintendent fumed. “I can take your life as easily as I swat a fly, if I feel like it.”

Song Jiang laughed coldly. “Because I don't give you money I deserve to die. In that case what should be the fate of a man who has befriended Wu Yong of Mount Liangshan?”

The superintendent dropped the staff. “What's that you say?”

“I'm talking about Military Advisor Wu Yong's friend. Why do you ask?”

The superintendent hastily pulled Song Jiang aside. “Who are you? How do you know about that?”

Song Jiang smiled. “I'm from Yuncheng County, Shandong Province. My name is Song Jiang.”

Startled, the superintendent clasped his hands together respectfully. “Song Jiang the Timely Rain!”

“It didn't seem worth mentioning.”

“Brother, this is no place to talk. I can't kowtow here. In the city we can speak freely. Please come with me.”

“Fine, I'll be with you in a few moments. I just want to lock my door.”

Song Jiang went back to his room, got Wu Yong's letter, took some silver, came out, locked the door, and asked the guard to keep an eye on things. Then he and the superintendent left the prison and went into Jiangzhou. They mounted the stairs to the upper storey of a tavern off the street and sat down.

“Where did you see Wu Yong, brother?” asked the superintendent.

Song Jiang produced the letter from inside his clothes and handed it to him. The superintendent tore open the envelope, read the missive, then concealed it in his sleeve. Dropping to his knees, he kowtowed.

Song Jiang quickly returned the courtesy. “I'm afraid I spoke rudely to you. Please forgive me,” he begged.

“All I knew was that a prisoner named Song had been delivered,” the superintendent explained. “It's our custom for all newly arrived exiles to pay five ounces of silver. But more than ten days passed and there was no sign of the gift. I wasn't very busy today, so I came down to collect in person. I never knew it was you. I hope I didn't offend you there in prison, brother. I beg your pardon.”

“The head keeper spoke to me of you several times. I intended to call on you and pay my respects, but I didn't know where you lived and had no occasion to go into town. I could only wait for you to come. That's what delayed our meeting. I didn't care about the five ounces of silver. I thought if I deliberately withheld them, brother would be sure to come. Today we've met and all my wishes have been answered.”

Who was this superintendent? He was none other than Dai Zong to whom Wu Yong had written a letter of introduction, the head of Jiangzhou's two prisons. In Song times prison heads in the Jinling region were called “Master;” in the Hunan region they were known as “Superintendent.” Dai

had an astonishing talent. Whenever he was out on an urgent mission he would wrap a picture of a god around each of his legs, and this gave him miraculous travelling powers. He could cover five hundred *li* in a single day. He could do eight hundred if he tied two to each leg. For this reason everyone hailed him as Dai Zong the Marvellous Traveller.

Now that both men had revealed their feelings and motives they were very pleased with each other. Sitting in a corner room, they summoned the waiter and ordered wine and tidbits and vegetable dishes. Over the wine, Song Jiang told of the many bold heroes and men he had met on the road. Dai Zong, too, spoke frankly, revealing his relations with Wu Yong.

They talked intimately and without reserve. Before they had finished more than two or three cups of wine they heard a tumult of voices on the floor below. The waiter hurried into their room.

“Superintendent, you're the only one who can handle him,” he said to Dai. “There's no other way. Please go and settle this.”

“Who's raising all that row down there?”

“It's that brother Li we often see you with, the man called Iron Ox. He's trying to borrow money from the host.”

Dai laughed. “That rascal is misbehaving again. I couldn't imagine who you meant.” To Song Jiang he said: “Excuse me a minute, brother. I'll bring him up.”

Dai went down the stairs and soon returned with a big dark complected fellow. Song Jiang was taken aback by the man's appearance.

“Who is this brother?” he asked the superintendent.

“One of our prison guards, Li Kui, from Baizhang Village, Yishui County, in Yizhou Prefecture. He's nicknamed Black Whirlwind. In his native parts he's also known as Iron Ox. He had to run away from home because he beat a man to death. He wandered to Jiangzou and here he's remained, although later there was an amnesty. Because he's nasty when he's drunk, many

people are afraid of him. He can wield two battle-axes, and he's good with fists and cudgel. He's on our prison staff."

Li Kui looked Song Jiang over. "Who's this swarthy fellow?" he asked Dai Zong.

The superintendent smiled. "You see what a crude lout he is, sir Clerk. No manners whatsoever."

"I only asked," said Li Kui. "What's crude about that?"

"Instead of saying 'Who is this gentleman?' you said 'Who is this swarthy fellow?' If that isn't crude, what is? Well, I'll tell you who he is. He's the noble brother you've been wanting to join for so long."

"Not Blacky Song Jiang, the Timely Rain from Shandong?"

"Must you be so vulgar?" Dai shouted. "Referring to him like that! Haven't you any sense of rank? Kowtow to him, quickly. What are you waiting for?"

"I will if he's really Song Jiang. But if he's just some idler, I'll be blown if I will. You're not just making sport of me, are you, brother?"

"I am indeed Blacky Song Jiang, of Shandong," Song Jiang assured him.

Li Kui clapped his hands. "My blessed grandfather! Why didn't you say so earlier? Iron Ox delighted!" He flopped to the ground and kowtowed.

Song Jiang hastily returned the compliment. "Brave brother, please be seated," he pleaded.

"Come sit beside me and have some wine," said Dai.

"All right, but none of those piddling little cups for me. I want a large bowl."

"What angered you downstairs?" Song Jiang asked.

“I have a big silver ingot that I pawned for ten ounces of silver coins,” said Li Kui. “I wanted to borrow ten ounces from the host here to get the bar back, plus a little more for spending money. But the knave wouldn't lend me a thing. I was just going to deal with him and smash his premises when brother Dai called me upstairs.”

“You need only ten ounces to redeem your ingot? Aren't there any interest charges?”

“I've got the interest money. All I need is another ten ounces.”

Song Jiang took out ten coins and gave them to Li Kui. “Go redeem your ingot,” he said. Dai Zong wanted to intervene, but Song Jiang had already handed the money over.

“Great,” said Li Kui. “You two brothers wait here. I'll repay as soon as I get my ingot. And I'll invite brother Song outside the town to eat and drink with us.”

“Stay a while,” said Song Jiang. “Have a few bowls here, first.”

“I'll be right back.” Li Kui pushed the door curtain aside and went downstairs.

“You shouldn't lend him money,” Dai Zong said. “I tried to prevent you, but you were too quick.”

“Why not?”

“Li Kui is pretty straight, but he loves to drink and gamble. Where would he get a big silver ingot! It's just a ruse, and you fell for it, brother. He must be going to gamble. That's why he left here so fast. If he wins, he'll return you money. If he loses, you'll never see a penny of those ten ounces of silver. I'm ashamed to have been the cause of this.”

Song Jiang laughed. “Don't treat me like a stranger, brother. The silver's not worth talking about. Let him lose it. He seems like a straightforward loyal fellow.”

“He has his good points. He's just too rude and rash. In the Jiangzhou prison when he gets drunk he doesn't bother the inmates, but he beats up the toughest guards. He's caused me no end of trouble. The slightest injustice drives him wild, and he tears into bullies. Everyone in Jiangzhou is afraid of him.”

“Let's have another cup or two, and stroll around outside the city.”

“I nearly forgot. I want to show you the scenery along the river.”

“That will be fine. I'd like to see the beauties of Jiangzhou.”

Meanwhile, Li Kui, having obtained some money, thought “What luck! Brother Song Jiang never met me before, but he lends me ten ounces of silver. He certainly deserves his reputation for righteousness and generosity. What a shame I've lost steadily at gambling these last few days. I haven't a copper to invite him out. I'll gamble with these ten ounces of silver he's given me. If I win a few strings of cash. I'll be able to wine and dine him, and that will make me look good.”

Li Kui hurried to a gambling den outside the city run by a man called

Little Zhang Yi. He threw his ten ounces of silver down on the gambling floor and said: “Let me have the toss coins.”

Little Zhang Yi knew he played honestly. “Wait a while, brother,” he urged. “You take the next round.”

“I want this one.”

“Bet from the sidelines which way the coins will fall.”

“I don't want to do that. I want to toss them myself. I'm betting five ounces of silver.” Li Kui snatched the coins from a man who was waiting to toss. “Who'll cover my bet?”

“I will,” said little Zhang Yi.

“Tails,” cried Li Kui, and tossed. The coins, came up heads.

Little Zhang Yi reached for the money.

“I came here with ten ounces,” said Li Kui.

“I'll beg you another five, then,” said Little Zhang Yi. “If you get tails, I'll return you the five you just lost.”

Li Kui took the coins and tossed. “Tails,” he shouted. Again the coins turned up heads.

Little Zhang Yi grinned. “I told you to wait for the next round and not grab the toss coins, but you wouldn't listen. Now you've thrown two heads in a row.”

“This silver doesn't belong to me.”

“It doesn't matter whose it is. You've lost and that's that.”

“Lend it to me, then. I'll pay you back tomorrow.”

“Idle chatter! As the old saying has it: “There's no pity in gambling.'

You've lost. What are you making such a fuss about?”

Li Kui hitched up the front of his gown. “Are you going to return me that money or not?”

“Brother Li, you gamble honestly as a rule. Why are you behaving so badly today?”

Li Kui did not reply but picked his money up from the floor and also snatched ten ounces of silver belonging to other gamblers, and put them all in the pocket of his cloth gown. Glaring, he said: “I usually play straight, but today's an exception.”

Little Zhang Yi rushed up to wrest back the money. Li Kui made a feint and threw him to the ground. A dozen gamblers swarmed against the big fellow. Li Kui feinted east and struck west, feinted south and struck north. He pounded them till they had no place to hide, then he headed for the gate.

“Where are you going young man?” the gate-keeper asked.

Li Kui thrust him aside, kicked open the gate and went out, pursued by the other gamblers.

Form the gate, they shouted after him: “How can you behave like this, brother Li? Taking our silver!” But they didn't dare come close.

As Li Kui was walking away, a man ran up behind him, seized his arm and shouted: “How dare you grab other people's property, you scoundrel?”

“What friggin business is that of yours?” Li Kui spun around to find himself looking at Dai Zong and, standing to Dai's rear, Song Jiang. A look of embarrassment spread over Li's face.

“Don't blame me, brother. Iron Ox usually plays fair. But I lost your silver and had no money to invite you out. I got excited and behaved badly.”

Song Jiang laughed. “Any time you need silver, just ask me. You obviously lost, so give them back their money.”

Li Kui had no choice but to take the silver from his pocket and put it in Song Jiang's hand. Song Jiang called Little Zhang Yi over and gave him the money.

“I'll take only what belongs to us,” said the gambler. “I don't want the other ten pieces which brother Li lost to me. He's liable to hold it against me.”

“Take it all, and don't worry,” Song Jiang urged, but the gambler was adamant. “Did he hurt any of you?” Song Jiang asked.

“The game master, the collector and the gate-keeper—he knocked them all down.”

“Then let this be their compensation. If you won't accept this for them, I'll go to them myself.”

The gambler took the silver, thanked Song Jiang and departed.

“Now,” said Song Jiang, “let's have a few cups with brother Li.”

“Up ahead beside the river is the Pipa Pavilion,” said Dai. “It was once frequented by the Tang poet Bai Juyi. Now it's a tavern. We can have some wine there and admire the river scenery.”

“Hadn't we better buy some tidbits in town first, to take along?”

“No need. They serve meals, too.”

“In that case, let's go.”

The three men proceeded to the Pipa Pavilion. One portion of it overlooked the Xunyang River, the other was used as living quarters for the host. Upstairs were ten or so tables. Dai Zong selected a clean one and invited Song Jiang to be seated. The superintendent sat down opposite, and placed Li Kui at his side. They ordered vegetables, fruit and seafood delicacies to go with the wine. The waiter produced two jugs of “Springtime in Jade Bottles”—a famous Jiangzhou liquor— and removed the clay stoppers.

“A large bowl for me,” said Li Kui. “I can't drink out of those little cups.”

“Rustic,” Dai barked. “I want you to just drink your wine and keep quiet.”

“This gentleman and I will use cups,” Song Jiang told the waiter. “Give our big brother a large bowl.”

The waiter responded and went out. He soon returned with a bowl which he placed in front of Li Kui. He poured the wine and served the tidbits. Li Kui grinned.

“You're really a fine man, brother Song, as everyone says. You understand me. Getting you as a friend is one of the best things that ever happened to me.”

Six or seven rounds of drinks were consumed. Song Jiang was pleased with his two companions. After drinking several cups, he suddenly got a craving for hot pepper fish soup.

“Is there any fresh fish around here?” he asked Dai Zong.

“Don't you see all those fishing boats on the river?” Dai responded with a smile. “The whole region is teeming with fish and rice.”

“Some hot pepper fish soup would be just right for sobering up.”

Dai called the waiter and ordered three servings of fish in hot pepper soup. Not long after, the soup arrived.

“'Beautiful crockery is more satisfying than delicious food',” Song Jiang quoted. “Although this is only a tavern, they certainly have lovely bowls.” He picked up his chopsticks. After urging Dai Zong and Li Kui to eat, he tasted the fish and sipped the soup.

Li Kui didn't bother with chopsticks. He pulled the fish out of his bowl with his hand and ate it, bones and all. Song Jiang couldn't help laughing. He took two more sips of soup, then put down his chopsticks and stopped eating.

Dai Zong said: “This is preserved fish, brother. I'm sure it's not to your taste.”

“I thought a little fresh fish soup would go well after wine. But this fish isn't really very good.”

“I can't eat mine, either. I don't like salted fish.”

Li Kui, who had finished his own bowl, said: “If you brothers don't want yours, I'll eat it for you.” He scooped the fish out of Song Jiang's bowl with his fingers and consumed it, then did the same with Dai Zong's. He spattered the whole table with soup.

Song Jiang watched Li Kui demolish three bowls of fish soup, including bones. He summoned the waiter.

“I think this brother is still hungry. Bring him two catties of sliced meat. I'll pay when you've added up the bill.”

“We've no beef, only mutton. You can have all the fat mutton you want.”

Li Kui flung the remnants of his soup in the man's face, slopping his clothes.

“What are you doing?” Dai Zong yelled.

“This sassy villain has the nerve to pretend I eat nothing but beef and won't give me any mutton.”

“I only asked,” the waiter protested. “I didn't say anything.”

“Go slice the meat,” said Song Jiang. “I'll pay.”

Swallowing his anger, the man sliced two catties of mutton and served it on a platter. Li Kui didn't stand on ceremony. In a twiddle of thumbs, he chomped the whole thing down.

“You're a good man,” Song Jiang said admiringly.

“Brother Song can read my friggin mind. Meat's much better than fish.”

Dai called the waiter over. “The bowls you served that fish soup in were very nice, but the fish was too salty. Don't you have any fresh fish you can make a pepper soup of for this gentleman here, to cut the effects of the wine?”

“To tell you the truth, sir, that fish was last night's. Today's live catch is still on the boats. But none of it can be sold until the catch-master comes. So we don't have any fresh fish yet.”

Li Kui jumped up. “I'll get a couple for brother.”

“Don't go,” said Dai Zong. “We'll ask the waiter to buy some.”

“Those fishermen won't dare refuse me. There's nothing to it.”

The superintendent couldn't stop him. Li Kui left. “I hope you'll excuse me, brother,” Dai said to Song Jiang, “for introducing you to a man like that. He

has absolutely no manners. I'm very embarrassed."

"That's his nature. No one can change it. But I respect his honesty."

The two chatted and joked in the Pipa Pavilion.

Li Kui went down to the river. Eighty or ninety fishing boats were moored in a row to willow trees along the bank. Some of the fishermen were sprawled asleep in the stern, some were mending nets on the bow. Others were bathing in the water. It was the middle of the fifth lunar month, and a red sun was sinking in the west. Of the catch-master there was no sign, and so no fish were on sale.

"You've got fresh fish on board," Li Kui called. "Let me have a couple."

"We can't open the hatches till the catch-master comes. Don't you see all those pedlars waiting on the bank?"

"Who cares about your friggin catch-master. Just let me have two fish."

"We haven't burned the paper ingots yet to pay the gods. How can we open the hatches and give you fish?"

Before the fishermen could stop him, Li Kui jumped onto one of the boats. He didn't understand anything about these craft, and he hauled up a bamboo partition.

"Don't do that," the fishermen on the bank yelled.

Li Kui groped around under the hatch cover, but he couldn't find any fish. The river boats had large openings in the stern which let the water in and kept the fish in the hold alive. The bamboo partition was to prevent them from swimming out. Jiangzhou was supplied with fresh fish through this method. When Li Kui pulled up the partition, all the fish in the boat escaped.

He leaped over to the adjoining craft and hauled Up its bamboo partition. Seventy or eighty fishermen rushed on board and attacked Li Kui with bamboo poles. Enraged, he stripped off his gown and stood with only a

checkered kerchief covering his loins. He snatched half a dozen of the punting poles with both hands and snapped them like scallions. The startled fishermen left hastily, undid the moorings of their boats and shoved off.

Li Kui, naked as an owl, angrily seized a broken pole and charged up the bank to continue the battle. The pedlars shouldered their carrying-poles and fled in confusion.

In the midst of this turmoil, a man was seen approaching along a path. “You've come at last, master,” several persons called. “That big dark fellow has been grabbing fish. He's driven off all the boats.”

“Which big dark fellow? How dare he behave like that?”

“There, on the bank, chasing and beating people.”

The man sped towards Li Kui, shouting: “Have you eaten a panther's heart or a tiger's gall that you dare mess up my business?”

Li Kui looked at him. He was over six feet tall, about thirty-two or three, with a black mustache and goatee. His head was swathed in blue silk of a swastika pattern, through which a lock of hair protruded bound by a string of heartsblood red. He wore a white cloth gown, tied at the waist by a red sash. On his feet were many-looped hemp sandals with black and white bird's-foot design. He held a weighing scale in one hand.

He had come to sell fish, but when he saw Li Kui knocking people about, he passed his scale to a pedlar and rushed forward. “Who else do you want to beat, scoundrel?” he cried.

Without a word, Li Kui whirled his pole and swung. The man dodged and seized the pole. Li Kui grabbed him by the hair. Three times the man snatched for his legs, hoping to trip him up. But Li Kui had the strength of an ox. He simply held him off and prevented him from grappling. The man pummelled Li Kui's ribs, but the big fellow was unperturbed. When he started kicking, Li Kui pushed his head down and pounded his back like a drum with a fist of iron. He couldn't get away.

Someone ran up behind Li Kui and wrapped his arms around his waist, helped by another man. “You can't do this,” they exclaimed.

Li Kui turned his head and saw Dai Zong and Song Jiang. He released his grip and the man he had been thumping sped away like a wisp of smoke.

“I told you not to go for fish,” Dai scolded. “And here you are, fighting. Suppose you killed him? You have to spend the rest of your life in jail.”

“Afraid I'd implicate you? If I killed anyone, I'd bear the whole blame myself.”

“Don't talk like that, brother,” said Song Jiang. “Put your gown on, and we'll have some wine.”

Li Kui retrieved his gown from beneath a willow, slung it over his arm, and set off with Dai and Song. Before they had gone a dozen paces a voice behind them shouted: “Swarthy rascal, you and I are going to have this out.”

Li Kui turned. The catch-master, naked except for a breechclout, had skin as white as snow. He had removed his blue silk head binding, revealing a topknot of hair tied with string of heartsblood red. He was poling a boat towards the bank.

“Villain who deserves ten thousand slices,” he yelled. “If I fear you I'm no man. Whoever runs from this fight is a craven coward.”

Li Kui roared with rage, cast his gown aside, and rushed to meet the foe. The man poled his boat a bit closer to the bank, cursing steadily.

“Come ashore, if you're such a man,” Li Kui invited.

The catch-master poked Li Kui in the legs with his pole. Furious, the big fellow leaped on board. Quicker than it takes to say, the man set himself and, with a few shoves of the pole, sped the craft like an arrow to the middle of river.

Li Kui knew how to swim, but not very well. He was confused and alarmed. The man stopped his swearing and set the pole down.

“Come on,” he said, “let's see who'll be the victor.” He seized Li Kui by the arms. “I'm not going to fight you yet. I want you to drink some water, first.” With his feet he tipped the boat over, turning it bottom up and dumping both men in the river.

Song Jiang and Dai Zong, who had hurried to the bank, groaned. Nearly five hundred people were also watching from beneath the willows. “The big dark fellow was tricked,” they said. “Even if he escapes with his life, he'll get a bellyful of water.”

The river parted and Li Kui was lifted up, only to be shoved down under again. The two men battled in the jade waves—one dark to the point of blackness, the other pale as glistening frost. Fiercely interlocked they fought, and the five hundred spectators on the bank raised cheer after cheer.

Li Kui had been ducked so often that his eyes were white. Again he was lifted, again pushed under. He was clearly getting the worst of it. Song Jiang told Dai Zong to ask people to save him.

“Who is that big white fellow?” Dai Zong asked.

“He's our local catch-master,” someone replied. “Zhang Shun.”

When Song Jiang heard that name, he exclaimed: “Not the one they call White Streak in the Waves?”

“Yes, that's him.”

“I have a letter for him back at the prison from his brother Zhang Heng,” Song Jiang told the superintendent.

Dai went to the edge of the bank and called: “Brother Zhang, stop fighting. There's a letter for you from your older brother Zhang Heng. That big dark fellow is our friend. Let him go. Come ashore and talk.”

Zhang Shun recognized the superintendent. He released Li Kui, hurried to the shore, climbed the bank and greeted Dai respectfully.

“Forgive my bad manners, Superintendent,” he said.

“For my sake, rescue that brother of mine and bring him here,” Dai pleaded. “There's someone I want you to meet.”

Zhang Shun dived into the river and swam swiftly to where Li Kui was floundering about, his head in the water. Zhang grasped him by the hand. His legs treaded water so powerfully he seemed to be walking on land, and the waves only came up to his navel. With one hand he hauled Li Kui towards the shore. The audience on the bank cheered. Song Jiang was stricken dumb with amazement. The two men soon reached the bank. Li Kui, gasping, vomited up a lot of water.

“Please come with me to the Pipa Pavilion where we can talk,” said Dai.

Zhang Shun got his gown and put it on. Li Kui did the same, and the four men went to the pavilion.

“Do you know me, brother?” Dai asked Zhang Shun.

“Of course, Superintendent. But it's never been my good fortune to meet you.”

Dai pointed at Li Kui. “Did you know him before? Today you two have clashed.”

“Naturally I know brother Li. But this is the first time we've matched strength.”

“You ducked me plenty,” said Li Kui.

“And you really pounded me,” Zhang Shun replied.

“You're now brothers who've contended,” said Dai. “'You don't know a man till you've fought him,' as the old saying goes.”

“In the future, don't try to start anything with me on land,” Li Kui warned.

“I'll just wait for you on the water.”

All four men laughed, and mutually apologized for their rudeness. Pointing at Song Jiang, Dai addressed himself to Zhang Shun.

“Do you recognize this brother?”

“No. I've never seen him before.”

Li Kui jumped to his feet. “That's Blacky Song Jiang.”

“Not Clerk Song of Yuncheng, the Timely Rain from Shandong?”

“Yes, he's brother Song Jiang,” Dai confirmed.

Zhang Shun promptly kowtowed. “I've long known your fame, but I never dreamed we'd meet today. Many's the time I've heard brothers in the gallant fraternity tell of your virtues, how you rescue those in danger and help the needy, how righteous you are, how generous.”

“You mustn't exaggerate. Not long ago I spent a few days in the home of Li Jun the Turbulent River Dragon, below Jieyang Ridge. Then, because of an encounter with Mu Hong at the Xunyang River, I also met your brother Zhang Heng. He wrote a letter which he asked me to deliver to you. I have it back at the prison. I came here today to the Pipa Pavilion with Superintendent Dai and brother Li to drink some wine and admire the river scenery. I got a sudden craving for fish soup to sober me up, and brother Li volunteered to get the fish. We couldn't stop him. Hearing a great row down by the bank, we sent the waiter to see what was going on. He said the big dark fellow was beating people. We rushed down to stop him. Little did we think that we would meet you, warrior. I have indeed have been blessed by Heaven today. I've made the acquaintance of three bold gallants. Please, let's be seated and have a few cups.”

They summoned the waiter to lay the table and bring wine and tidbits.

“If it's fish you want, brother,” Zhang Shun said to Song Jiang, “I'll get you some.”

“Fine.”

“I'll go with you,” said Li Kui.

“Not again?” said Dai. “Haven't you drunk enough water?”

Zhang Shun laughed, and took Li Kui's hand. “We'll go for the fish together and see what the response is.”

They left the pavilion and went down to the river. Zhang Shun whistled, once. All the fishing craft on the lake came poling towards them.

“Who's got any golden carp?” Zhang Shun asked.

“Here,” cried one of the boatmen.

“I've got some,” shouted another.

In an instant a dozen golden carp were produced. Zhang Shun selected four large ones and strung them together with a tendril of willow. He told Li Kui to take them up to the pavilion and have the kitchen start preparing them. He himself counted the pedlars and instructed an apprentice to commence weighing and selling the catch. Then he returned to the Pipa Pavilion to rejoin Song Jiang.

“Why did you bring so many?” the clerk asked him. “One would have been enough.”

“Such small gifts are not worth mentioning. What you can't finish you can take back to you residence for snacks.”

They sat in accordance with their age. Li Kui, being older, took the third place. Zhang Shun had the fourth. The waiter was told to bring two jugs of best quality “Spring in Jade Bottles,” plus seafood and various delicacies to go with the wine. Zhang Shun instructed the waiter to make pepper soup

with one of the carp. Another was to be steamed in wine, sliced and fried in batter.

The four men talked freely as they sat drinking. Just as they were loosening up, a girl of sixteen, dressed in silks, came in. She curtsied and hailed each respectfully and started to sing. She interrupted Li Kui, who had begun boasting of his bold exploits. The other three men turned to listen to the girl.

Li Kui jumped up and thrust two fingers against her forehead. With a scream, she fell over backwards. People crowded in to see what was the matter. The girl's peach-like complexion had turned earthen, her lips were unable to speak. She lay motionless. The host wanted to detain the four men and torn them over to the authorities.

Truly, an inelegant uncultured fellow, unmoved by fragrant jade beauty, had created a troublesome problem. How did Song Jiang and the three others get out of the tavern? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 39
In the Xunyang Pavilion Song Jiang Recites a Rebellious Poem
From Liangshan Marsh Dai Zong Sends a False Letter

The host detained the four. “Gentlemen, what have you done?” he cried. Very flurried, he ordered his waiters to revive the girl.

They sprayed her with water, and she opened her eyes. They helped her to her feet. A bit of skin had been rubbed from her forehead. It was this which had caused her to faint. Everyone was greatly relieved.

When the girl's parents heard that the perpetrator was Black Whirlwind, they were stunned. They didn't dare protest. Now their daughter had regained her speech. The mother bound the girl's head with a kerchief and collected her hair-pins and ornaments.

“What is your name?” Song Jiang asked the woman. “Where do you live?”

“Our family name is Song. We're from the capital, sir. This girl, Jade Lotus, is our only child. Her father has taught her a few ballads. On his instructions, she sings here in the Pipa Pavilion. But she's an impatient, ignorant child. She insisted on singing even though she saw you gentlemen were talking. So this brother moved his hand and injured her a bit. Nothing worth going to the authorities about, and involving you gentlemen.”

Song Jiang was pleased that the woman spoke with a proper understanding of her place. “If you'll send someone with me to the prison,” he said, “I'll give you twenty ounces of silver for your daughter's recuperation. Find her a good man and get her married. That's better than singing in this tavern for a living.”

The girl's parents kowtowed. “Twenty ounces is really too much,” they said.

“My word is my bond. I never lie. Let your husband come with me and I'll give him the money.”

Again they thanked him. “We are deeply grateful for your assistance, sir.

Dai Zong berated Li Kui. “You must get on with people better. Look how much silver you've made brother spend.”

“I only touched her with my finger and down she went. I never saw such a friggin female. Who told her to be so tender? Why, you could punch me in the face a hundred times and I wouldn't mind.”

Song Jiang and the others laughed. Zhang Shun called the waiter.

“The bill is on me.”

“Never mind,” the waiter said politely. “It doesn't matter. Just go along.”

Song Jiang wouldn't hear of Zhang Shun paying. “I was the one who invited you two,” he protested. “Why should you pay?”

But Zhang Shun wouldn't budge. “It's a rare privilege to know you, brother,” he said. “Zhang Heng and I both were thinking of joining you

when you were in Shandong. Today, I've been lucky enough to meet you at last. You must let me make this small gesture. It's only a trifling token."

"Since brother Zhang respects you so, why not let him have his way?" Dai Zong suggested.

"All right," said Song Jiang. "But only on condition that I treat him to a few cups in return, another day."

Zhang Shun was delighted. Carrying the remaining two carp, he, Dai Zong, Li Kui and the girl's father left the Pipa Pavilion with Song Jiang and escorted him back to the prison. All sat for a while in the Copying Section. Song Jiang gave two small bars of silver weighing twenty ounces to the girl's father. The man thanked him and departed. Of that no more need be said.

It was growing dark. Zhang Shun presented the fish, Song Jiang gave him the letter from his brother, and they bid each other farewell. Song Jiang handed a large fifty ounce silver ingot to Li Kui.

"You may have use for this, brother," he said.

Dai Zong also took his leave. He and Li Kui hurried to return to the city.

Song Jiang sent one of the fish to the warden, the other he cooked for himself. Because it was fresh and delicious, he ate more than he should, and in the middle of the night his stomach knotted with cramps. By dawn he had more than twenty bouts of diarrhea. He lay weak and faint in his room. Song Jiang was always very good to people, and everyone in the prison cooked him soup and gruel and looked after him.

The next day, knowing that Song Jiang liked fish, Zhang Shun brought him two more large golden carp, in thanks for delivering the letter from his brother. He found him sick in bed, being cared for by the other prisoners. Zhang Shun wanted to call a doctor.

"I over-ate that nice fresh fish. If you buy me some diarrhea medicine I'll be fine," said Song Jiang.

Zhang Shun presented one fish to Warden Wang and one to Head Keeper Zhao, bought the medicine for Song Jiang, and departed. Of that no more need be said. The prisoners brewed the medicine and continued looking after the patient.

Dai Zong and Li Kui, bringing meat and wine, came to the Copying Section the next day to call on Song Jiang. The worst of his illness was over, but he was hardly in condition for wine and meat. They had no choice but to consume it themselves outside his room. They kept him company till late in the day, then said goodbye and left. Of that, too, no more need be said.

After resting six or seven days, Song Jiang felt completely recovered. He considered going into town and seeing Dai Zong. Another day passed without any visit from the superintendent. Early the following morning after breakfast Song Jiang took some silver, locked his door, left the prison and strolled into the city. Outside the prefectural office, he asked someone where Superintendent Dai lived.

“He has no wife or children,” the man said. “He stays in the Guan Yin Monastery next door to the City Temple.”

Song Jiang went there, but Dai's door was locked. He had already gone out.

Next, the clerk sought Li Kui the Black Whirlwind. “He's a headless ghost, that one,” several people said. “He hasn't any home, except for the prison. And he has no routine. He'll spend a few days here, a couple of days there. You never know where he's at.”

Song Jiang then went looking for the catch-master Zhang Shun. “He lives in a village in the suburbs,” he was told. “Even when he sells fish it's by the river bank outside the city. He only comes into town to collect money.”

The clerk again left the city, still hoping to find Zhang Shun. But he met no one he could ask. He walked on, alone and depressed. Then he came upon a lovely stretch of river, and was enchanted by the view. He saw ahead a several storied tavern. Beside it, hanging from a tall pole, was a blue banner emblazoned with the words: *The Excellent Cellar by the Xunyang River.*

Xunyang Pavilion, the tavern's name, was written large in the calligraphy of poet Su Dongpo on a sign beneath the eaves.

“I heard of Jiangzhou's Xunyang Pavilion back in Yuncheng,” Song Jiang mused, “and here it is. Although I'm alone, I mustn't miss this opportunity. I'll go upstairs and relax a while.”

On the carved vermilion pillars to either side of the door were two white plaques on which a couplet was written: *Incomparable wine* and *A world-famous place to dine.*

Song Jiang entered, mounted the stairs and sat down in a room overlooking the river. He leaned on the railing and gazed around appreciatively.

A waiter came in. “Are you waiting for others, sir, or are you here by yourself?”

“I was expecting two guests, but they haven't show up. Bring me a jug of good wine, first, and some fruit and meats. I don't want any fish.”

The waiter went downstairs and soon returned with a jug of “Moonlight Breeze on Lovers' Bridge”—a fine liquor, and a tray of vegetable dishes and tidbits to go with it. Then came fat mutton, crispy chicken, less-steeped goose and fillet of beef, all served on vermilion plates and platters.

Song Jiang was very pleased. “Delicious food well arranged on excellent crockery. Jiangzhou deserves its fame,” he thought. “Although I'm here as an exile, I can still admire the scenery. We have a few scenic spots and antique remains at home, but nothing to compare with this.”

Seated beside the railing, he drank steadily. Gradually, without being aware of it, he became drunk. In a surge of melancholy, he thought: “I was born in Shandong Province and raised in Yuncheng Town. A clerk by profession, I know many a good fellow in the gallant fraternity, and have earned something of a reputation. But though over thirty, I haven't made my name yet or done anything outstanding. Instead, I've the tattoo of the criminal on my cheek and am living in exile. Who knows when I'll see my old father and brother again!”

The wine went to his head, and he wept, very depressed. Suddenly, he decided to write a poem. He ordered the waiter to bring brush-pen and ink-stone, then rose and scanned appreciatively the poems which others had written on the white calcimined walls.

“Why not write my poem on the wall, too?” he said to himself. “Some day, when I've earned my place in the world, I'll come here and read it again, and think back on my present misery.”

Stimulated by the wine, he ground a thick mixture of ink, soaked his brush-pen in it, and wrote on the white wall:

Since childhood I studied classics and history,

And grew up shrewd and intelligent.

Today, a tiger enduring in the wilderness,

I crouch with tooth and claw, intent.

A criminal's tattoo upon my cheek,

An unwilling exile in far Jiangzhou,

I shall have my revenge some day,

And dye red with blood the Xunyang's flow.

Song Jiang laughed uproariously, delighted with his effort. He drank several more cups of wine. By now he was dancing for joy. Again he took up his pen and added four more lines:

Heart in Shandong, body in Wu,

Drifting, I breathe sighs into the air.

If I achieve my lofty aim,

No rebel chief will with me compare.

At the bottom, in large script he wrote: “by Song Jiang of Yuncheng.” and tossed the pen on the table. He intoned the verses to himself, then downed a few more cups of wine. He was very drunk. Song Jiang asked for the bill, paid, and told the waiter to keep the change. Brushing smooth his long sleeves, he staggered down the stairs and returned to the prison. He opened his door and collapsed on the bed.

He slept straight through till the following dawn. When he awakened he remembered nothing about having written a poem in the Xunyang Pavilion. He had a bad hangover, and lay on his bed all day. Of that no more need be said.

Opposite Jiangzhou, on the other side of the river, was a town called Wuweijun, a desolate place. Living there was a former deputy prefect named Huang Wenbing. Although he'd read a bit of the classics, he was a narrow-hearted sycophant who envied men of ability. Those superior in talent he injured, those inferior he mocked. His speciality was harming people throughout the township.

He knew that Prefect Cai was the son of the premier, and frequently crossed the river to call and ingratiate himself. He hoped that this would lead to an appointment making him an official again. It was Song Jiang's fate to arouse this man and be treated by him as an adversary.

That day Huang Wenbing was sitting idle and bored at home. He called two servants, bought some attractive gifts, crossed the river in his own swift boat, and went to call on the prefect. But Cai was in the midst of an official

banquet, and Huang didn't dare interrupt. He returned to the boat, which his servants had moored, by coincidence, below the Xunyang Pavilion.

It was a hot day, and Huang strolled up to the tavern. After looking over the wine cellar, he mounted the stairs to the rooms along the balcony. He glanced at the many poems upon the wall. Some were well-written, others were incoherent nonsense. Huang smiled superciliously.

He then read the verses of Song Jiang. “This is rebellious,” he exclaimed. “Who could have written it?” He looked at the signature: “Song Jiang of Yuncheng.”

Huang read the poem again: *Since childhood I studied classics and history, /And grew up shrewd and intelligent...* He laughed coldly. “Thinks pretty well of himself!”

He continued: *Today, a tiger enduring in the wilderness, /I crouch with tooth and claw, intent...* Huang cocked his head to one side. “The lout has no sense of fitness.”

He read on: *A criminal's tattoo upon my cheek, /An unwilling exile in far Jiangzhou...* Again Huang laughed. “This is no noble-minded person. He's only an exiled prisoner.”

Once more he read: *I shall have my revenge some day, /And dye red with blood the Xunyang's flow...* Huang shook his head. “Who does the villain want to wreak vengeance on? And why here? He's only an exile. How much of a stir can he make?”

Heart in Shandong, body in Wu, / Drifting, I breathe sighs into the air... Huang nodded. “At least those lines make sense.”

If I achieve my lofty aim, / No rebel chief will with me compare... Huang stuck out his tongue and wagged his head. “What brass. An incomparable rebel leader! If that's not a proclamation of revolt I don't know what is!”

Huang read the signature again: “Song Jiang of Yuncheng.”

“Where have I heard that name before?” he pondered. “Probably some petty functionary.”

He summoned the waiter. “Who wrote this poem?”

“A man who was here last night. He drank a whole jug all by himself.”

“What does he look like?”

“He has two lines of tattooing on his cheek. He must be one of the inmates of the city prison. A swarthy, short, fat fellow.”

“I see,” said Huang. He asked for a pen and ink, copied the poem on a sheet of paper, and placed it inside his clothes. “Don't scrape it off,” he cautioned the waiter.

He went down the stairs and returned to the boat, where he spent the night. The next day after breakfast, with the servants bearing the gifts, he again proceeded to the prefecture. Cai had already completed court and had withdrawn to the residence. An officer went in to announce Huang. Before long the man came out and conducted Huang to the rear hall. There, Cai joined him. After some friendly chatter and when the gifts had been presented, both men took their seats.

“I came across the river last night to pay my respects,” said Huang, “but Your Excellency was giving a banquet and I didn't want to intrude. So I've come today, instead.”

“Such an intimate friend, you could have joined us. I'm sorry I missed you.” Cai ordered that tea be served.

After a few sips, Huang asked: “May I be so bold as to enquire whether there has been any word from you honorable father the premier lately?”

“I received a letter from him just a couple of days ago..”

“What's the news of the capital?”

“He says the Royal Astrologer in a report to the throne states that an evil star is shining on our land of Wu, and on Zhu, and that there are probably trouble makers abroad who must be eliminated. What's more, says my father, children on the street are chanting this rhyme: *The destroyer of our country is home and tree; water and work are armed soldiery; stretched in a line are thirty-six; Shandong will put us in a terrible fix.* He advises me to keep a careful watch on my prefecture.”

Huang thought a moment. Then he smiled. “I'm not surprised, Excellency.” He took from his sleeve the poem he had copied and handed it to Cai. “Here's the reason.”

The prefect read it. “A rebellious poem. Where did you get it?”

“I didn't dare to intrude last night, and walked back to the river bank. For want of something better to do, I went into the Xunyang Pavilion to escape the heat. I saw poems idlers had inscribed on the white-washed wall, including this newly written one.”

“What sort of person is the author?”

“He's put his name down. Song Jiang of Yuncheng.”

“Who is he?”

“He tells us in his poem: *A criminal's tattoo upon my cheek, / An unwilling exile in far Jiangzhou.* He's an exile, a criminal in the city prison.”

“What can a fellow like that do?”

“Don't underestimate him, Excellency. He fits in exactly with the children's rhyme your honorable father mentions in his letter.”

“What do you mean?”

“The destroyer of our country is home and tree. Put the top of the character for 'home' over the character for 'tree' and you've got the character 'Song'. He's the man who'll pillage our country's money and grain. Then, *Water and work are armed soldiery*—the second line. Place the 'water' radical next to

the character for 'work' and you've got 'Jiang', the man who will raise armed soldiers. And it's Song Jiang who's written the rebellious poem. This is a warning from Heaven. How fortunate for the populace!”

“What about *Stretched in a line are thirty-six; Shandong will put us in a terrible fix?”*

“Thirty-six either refers to the year of our emperor's reign, or it's a number of some sort. As for *Shandong will put us in a terrible fix*, Yuncheng County is in Shandong. We've something to coincide with every line of the rhyme.”

“Is the fellow still here?”

“When I questioned the waiter last night he said the man wrote the poem the day before yesterday. But it's easy enough to find out. Check the prison register.”

“An extremely good idea.” Cai ordered an attendant to fetch the register of the city prison from the record room. Cai examined it personally. Sure enough, there was the entry: “Fifth month. One newly exiled prisoner—Song Jiang of Yuncheng County.”

“The man in the rhyme. This is very important,” said Huang. “If we delay, news that we're on to him may leak out. Better seize him immediately and lock him up. Then we can discuss what to do next.”

“Precisely,” said the prefect. He convened court and summoned the superintendent of the city's two prisons. Dai Zong presented himself and hailed the prefect respectfully.

“Take some police, go to the city prison and bring Song Jiang of Yuncheng here,” Cai ordered. “He's written a rebellious poem in the Xunyang Pavilion. I don't want a moment's delay.”

Shocked, Dai Zong silently groaned and left the prefectural office. He mustered a number of prison guards. “Go home and get your weapons and assemble at my quarters next door to the City Temple,” he instructed them.

The men departed. Using his magic travel method, Dai sped to the prison's Copying Section and pushed open Song Jiang's door. His friend was there. When the clerk saw Dai enter, he hurried forward to greet him.

“I went into town the other day, but couldn't find you anywhere,” Song Jiang said. “I was so bored I walked to the Xunyang Pavilion and finished a bottle of wine all by myself. The effects still haven't worn off.”

“Brother,” Dai exclaimed, “what sort of poem did you write on the wall?”

“Who knows? I was drunk.”

“Just now the prefect summoned me and ordered me to bring men and arrest you for having written a rebellious poem in the Xunyang Pavilion. I was very shaken, but I told my men to wait for me by the City Temple to give me time to let you know first. Brother, what are we going to do? How can we get you out of this?”

Song Jiang scratched his head in perplexity. “I'm a goner,” he moaned.

“There is a way, though it may not work,” said Dai. “I can't delay any longer. I'll have to bring my police and arrest you. Mess your hair, spill your filth on the floor, roll in it, and pretend to be mad. When I come with my men, speak wildly and act as if you were out of your mind. I'll go back to the prefect and report that you're insane.”

“Thank you, brother. Save me, I beg you!”

Dai quickly bid farewell and returned to the city. At the City Temple he assembled his police and proceeded with them to the prison at a rapid pace. “Where is the new exile, Song Jiang?” he shouted with feigned ferocity. He led his men to Song Jiang's room in the Copying Section.

There they found the clerk, his hair in disarray, rolling in his own filth upon the floor.

“Who are you pricks?” Song Jiang demanded.

“Seize the wretch,” Dai roared.

Eyes glaring, Song Jiang fought in a frenzy. “I'm the son-in-law of the Jade Emperor of Heaven. He's sent me here with a hundred thousand divine troops to slaughter all of Jiangzhou. The King of Hades leads my advance guard, the Demon General commands my rear. The Jade Emperor has given me a golden seal weighing eight hundred catties. I'm going to kill every friggin one of you!”

“He's crazy,” said the policemen. “What's the use of arresting him?”

“You're right,” said Dai. “Let's go back and tell them. If we have to take him, we'll come again.”

They returned to the prefecture, where Cai was waiting in his court. “Song Jiang has taken leave of his senses,” they reported. “He rolls in filth and talks wild. He stinks so badly we didn't dare bring him here.”

Cai was about to inquire further when Huang emerged from behind a screen. “Don't believe them,” he advised the prefect. “That poem he wrote was not the work of a madman. There's something fishy going on.

Bring him in. If he can't walk, carry him.”

“You're right,” said Cai. He turned to the superintendent. “No more excuses. I want him here.”

Orders were orders. Dai groaned inwardly, and led his police once more to the prison. “It's not going well, brother,” he whispered. “I'll have to take you along.” Song Jiang was placed in a large bamboo cage and carried to the prefectural court.

“Bring the rogue forward,” the prefect directed.

Guards brought Song Jiang before the official dais, but he refused to kneel. “How dare you question me,” he cried, glaring. “I'm the son-in-law of the Jade Emperor. He's sent me here with a hundred thousand divine troops to slaughter all of Jingzhou. The King of Hades leads my advance guard, the Demon General commands my rear. The Jade Emperor has given me a

golden seal weighing eight hundred catties. Hide before I kill every friggin one of you!”

The prefect was at a loss. Again Huang addressed him. “Summon the warden and the head keeper. Ask them whether he was mad when he arrived, or did this happen only recently. If he was crazy when he came, then it's real. If this condition developed only now, then it's false.”

“Very well put,” said the prefect. He sent for the warden and the head keeper and questioned them. It was impossible for them to lie.

“He didn't show any signs of madness when he arrived,” they admitted. “He only became this way lately.”

Cai was furious. He instructed the guards to truss the prisoner up and give him fifty blows. Song Jiang was pounded till he was more dead than alive. His skin burst and his blood was streaming. Dai Zong watched, agonized, unable to help him.

At first Song Jiang continued to babble like a lunatic, but finally he could bear no more. “I wrote a rebellious poem because I was drunk,” he cried. “I didn't mean anything by it.”

Having obtained a confession, the magistrate directed that a twenty-five-catty rack for capital felons be placed around the prisoner's neck and that he be detained in the big jail. Song Jiang had been beaten so badly he couldn't walk. The rack was nailed fast and he was thrown into a cell for the condemned. Dai secretly ordered the guards to treat him well, and arranged for food to be sent in. Of that we'll say no more.

Cai adjourned court and invited Huang to the rear hall. “Were it not for your far-sightedness,” the prefect said, “I might have been fooled by that villain.”

“The case is urgent, Excellency. It would be best if you rushed a man to the capital with a letter to your honorable father, reporting how you are dealing with this matter of national importance. Suggest that if he wants the man, alive, you'll send him by prison cart. If he doesn't, or if he's afraid the fellow

will escape en route, you'll execute him here and eliminate a great danger. The emperor will also be very pleased with the news."

"There's reason in what you say. I was intending to send a person to the capital with gifts for my father, anyway. I shall mention your contribution in my letter and ask him to request the emperor to put you in charge of a wealthy city, so that you may quickly gain fame and fortune."

"All my life I shall rely on your beneficence, Excellency, and serve you as humbly as any groom."

The prefect wrote the letter and affixed his seal. "Who will you send as a trusted messenger?" Huang asked.

"The superintendent of our two city prisons is man named Dai Zong. He knows certain charms by which he can cover eight hundred *li* in one day. I'm giving him the mission. He'll make the round trip in ten days."

"If he travels that fast, splendid."

Cai entertained Huang with wine in the rear hall. The next day Huang took his leave of the prefect and returned to Wuweijun.

Cai filled two hampers with gold and jewels and precious baubles, then closed and sealed them. The following day he summoned Dai Zong to the rear hall.

"I have here some gifts and a letter which I want delivered to my father the premier in the Eastern Capital before his birthday, which is on the fifteenth of the sixth lunar month. The date is fast approaching, and only you can get there in time. Don't tell me about difficulties. Travel day and night and bring back a reply and I'll reward you handsomely. I have figured out your itinerary and just how long it should take, using your marvellous travel methods, and shall be awaiting your report. Don't dally on the road. This must not be delayed."

The superintendent couldn't refuse. He accepted the hampers and the letter, bid the prefect farewell, and left to prepare. Then he went to see Song Jiang

in his cell.

“You can relax, brother,” said Dai. “The prefect is sending me on a mission to the Eastern Capital, with a time limit of ten days. While I'm at the premier's residence I'll pull a few strings and get you out of this. Li Kui will be responsible for bringing you your food every day. Just be patient a little longer.”

“I hope you can save my life, brother.”

The superintendent summoned Li Kui and said: “Our brother has written a rebellious poem and has been convicted. We don't know yet what the outcome will be. I'm leaving today on a mission to the Eastern Capital and will be back soon. It's up to you to see it that he gets his food every day.”

“So he wrote a rebellious poem. What friggin difference does that make? Thousands of plotters have become big officials! You just go on to the capital and don't worry about a thing. No one in this prison will dare bother him. I'll return good for good. But if anybody plays rough, I'll take my battle-ax and chop his friggin head off!”

“Be careful, please. If you get drunk our brother is liable to miss his meals.”

“If that's what worries you, I won't touch a drop all the while you are gone. I'll look after brother Song Jiang every minute. Why not?”

Dai was very pleased. “That's fine,” he said, “if you're really determined.”

That day, he set out on his journey. Li Kui indeed gave up drink. He remained in the prison, tending to Song Jiang, never leaving him by so much as a step.

Dai Zong returned to his quarters, put on leggings, hemp sandals, and an apricot-yellow robe bound by a waist sash, into which he tucked his identification plaque. Dai changed his head kerchief and put the letter into his pouch, along with some money for the road. The hampers he carried on either end of a shoulder-pole.

Once outside the city, he attached two charms to each of his legs, murmured some magic words, and set forth. He travelled all day, and put up at an inn in the evening. Removing the charms, he burned simulated gold ingots of paper as a gift to the Emperor of Heaven. Then he retired.

He rose early the next morning, had some food and wine, and left the inn. Again he attached the four charms, shouldered the hampers, and travelled—so rapidly that the wind and rain whistled in his ears, and his feet didn't touch the ground. He stopped only once or twice for a snack along the road.

At the end of the day he again spent the night at an inn. The following morning he got up at the fifth watch, to take advantage of the dawn cool. Attaching the charms, he struck out with the hampers on his shoulder-pole. By mid-morning he had covered nearly three hundred *li* without encountering a single clean tavern.

It was a sticky day in early summer. Dai's clothes were soaked with sweat. He was nearly prostrated from the heat. Hungry and thirsty, he noticed a tavern ahead. It was beside a lake at the edge of a grove. Dai was there in the twiddle of a thumb. The tavern was spotlessly clean, and had twelve red lacquered tables, with benches to match, all in a row beside the windows.

He went in, chose a secluded table rested his hampers, untied his sash and removed his gown. This he sprayed with water and hung on the window railing to dry. As he sat down, the waiter approached.

“How much wine, sir? Would you like some meat to go with it? We have pork, mutton and beef.”

“Go easy on the wine. And bring me some rice.”

“Besides wine and rice we sell steamed bread and vermicelli soup.”

“I don't want meat. Have you any vegetables?”

“How about some peppery stewed bean-curd?”

“Just right.”

The waiter soon returned with bean-curd and two vegetable dishes, and poured out three large bowls of wine. Dai was famished. He quickly finished the wine and bean-curd. He was waiting for rice when the earth and sky began to turn dizzily. His sight fading, Dai fell backwards off the bench.

“He's down,” the waiter called.

From within the tavern a man emerged. It was Zhu Gui, the Dry-Land Crocodile, member of the Mount Liangshan stronghold.

“Take his hampers inside and see whether he's got anything on him,” Zhu Gui ordered.

Two assistants searched Dai and found a paper packet. They handed it to Zhu Gui. He removed the paper and revealed an envelope inscribed: “Peaceful Family Letter, with the Utmost Respect to His Father from His Son Cai Dezhang.” Zhu Gui tore open the envelope and read the missive from beginning to end. It said:

Today we have arrested a man who fits the prediction rhyme and who has written a rebellious poem—Song Jiang of Shandong, and are holding him in prison.... We await your orders for his disposition.

Zhu Gui was shocked beyond speech. His assistants were lifting Dai to carry him into the butchering shed when Zhu Gui noticed a red and green object attached to the sash lying on the bench. He picked it up. It was an official's identification plaque. Etched in silver were the words: “Dai Zong, Superintendent of the Two Prisons, Jiangzhou.”

“Wait,” Zhu Gui said to the cohorts. “I've often heard our military advisor talk of his friend Dai Zong the Marvellous Traveller from Jiangzhou. Can this be the man? But why is he bearing a letter that will harm Song Jiang? Heaven has sent him into my hands.” He instructed his assistants: “Give him the antidote and bring him round. I want to question him.”

The assistants poured a mixture into some water, raised Dai up and fed it to him. He soon opened his eyes and struggled to his feet. He saw Zhu Gui

with the letter in his hands.

“Who are you?” Dai shouted. “How dare you drug me? And you've opened the letter to the premier. Don't you know what a crime that is?”

Zhu Gui laughed. “So what? What's opening the premier's letter to a man who's opposing the Song emperor?”

Dai was astonished. “Who are you, bold fellow? What is your name?”

“I'm Zhu Gui, the Dry-Land Crocodile, of the gallant band in Liangshan Marsh.”

“Since you're one of the leaders, you must know Wu Yong.”

“He's our military advisor. He controls all our military operations. How do you know him?”

“He's a very close friend.”

“You're not Superintendent Dai, the Marvellous Traveller of Jiangzhou, he so often speaks about?”

“I am.”

“When Song Jiang was on his way to exile in Jiangzhou, he stayed at our stronghold, and Wu Yong gave him a letter to you. Why are you helping to take his life?”

“Song Jiang is like a brother to me. He wrote a rebellious poem and I couldn't prevent his arrest. I'm on my way to the capital right now to find a way to save him. I'd never harm Song Jiang.”

“You don't believe me?” retorted Zhu Gui. “Take a look at this.”

Dai read the letter the prefect had written. He was shocked. He told Zhu Gui how he had met Song Jiang, when he came with the note from Wu Yong, and how Song Jiang got drunk and wrote a rebellious poem in the Xunyang Pavilion.

“In that case, please come with me to the stronghold and talk it over with our leaders,” said Zhu Gui. “We've got to rescue Song Jiang.”

First he wined and dined Dai Zong. Then he went to the pavilion overlooking the lake and shot a whistling arrow to the opposite cove. A bandit promptly rowed over in a boat. Zhu Gui helped Dai and his hampers on board. They landed at the Shore of Golden Sands and climbed to the fortress. When it was reported to Wu Yong that they were at the gate, he hurried down to greet them.

“It's been a long time,” he said to Dai. “What good wind blows you here? Please come up. We'll talk in the stronghold.”

Wu Yong introduced him to the other leaders, and Zhu Gui told the reason for Dai's visit: “Song Jiang is in prison.”

Chao Gai hastily invited Dai to be seated and asked him how this came about. Dai related in detail the story of Song Jiang and his rebellious poem. Chao Gai was very alarmed. He proposed to the other leaders that they immediately muster men and horses, raid Jiangzhou and bring Song Jiang back to the fortress.

“That's not the way, brother,” Wu Yong said. “Jiangzhou's quite far from here. A large body of men and horses would only provoke disaster. 'Disturbing the grass alerts the snake.' It would mean Song Jiang's life. What's needed here is guile, not force. I'm not very clever but I have a little plan by which we can rescue Song Jiang. It involves Superintendent Dai.”

“Let's hear it, Military Advisor.”

“Dai has to bring back a reply to the letter Prefect Cai is sending to the Eastern Capital. We'll write a false one and turn the tables on them. The reply Superintendent Dai will deliver will say: 'Take no action against the prisoner Song Jiang. Send him here under appropriate guard. After thorough interrogation we shall execute him and put his head on display and discredit the prediction rhyme.' When Song Jiang is being escorted through this area, our men will snatch him. What do you think of my plan?”

“Suppose he doesn't pass this way? We'll miss our chance,” said Chao Gai.

“That's no problem,” said Gongsun Sheng. “We'll dispatch scouts near and far to inquire. Whichever path he travels, we'll be waiting for him. One way or another, we'll get him. Our only worry is that they won't convoy him to the capital.”

“The plan sounds all right,” said Chao Gai, “but who's going to write the reply of Cai Qing the premier?”

“I've thought of that,” said Wu Yong. “The four most favored styles of writing today are those of Su Dongpo, Huang Luzhi, Mi Yuanzhang, and Cai Jing. In all of Song, they are considered the most perfect. I have a scholar friend in the town of Jizhou named Xiao Rang. Because his calligraphy is so good, he's known as the Master Hand. He's also skilled with lance, staff, sword and knife. I know for a fact he can write in the style of Cai Jing. We'll have Superintendent Dai go to his house and say:

“The Yue Temple in Tai'an Prefecture needs an inscription written for a monument. Here are fifty ounces of silver for your family's expenses while you're gone.' Dai will bring him here. Later, we'll trick his wife and family into coming up the mountain also, and we'll get Xiao to join our band. How's that?”

“If he can write the reply, that's fine,” said Chao Gai. “But we'll need a seal as well.”

“There's another friend I have in mind for that. He's the best in the whole central plain, and he also lives in Jizhou. His name is Jin Dajian. He carves writing beautifully in stone and cuts excellent jade seals. What's more, he's a demon with lance and staff. He's known as the Jade-Armed Craftsman because he carves jade so well. Dai will give him fifty ounces of silver and tell him he's needed to engrave the monument. We'll capture him too on the way. We can use men like Jin and Xiao here in our stronghold.”

“Very shrewd,” commended Chao Gai.

That day a feast was laid for Dai Zong, and in the evening all retired.

The next morning after breakfast, Dai was disguised as a deacon and given two hundred ounces of silver. He tied on his charms, went down the mountain, and was ferried from the Shore of Golden Sands to the opposite side, where he set out for Jizhou. In less than two watches he arrived. He inquired for Xiao Rang the Master Hand.

“He lives in front of the Confucius Temple east of the prefectural office,” Dai was told.

The superintendent went to Xiao's door and coughed. “Is Master Xiao at home?” he called.

A scholar emerged and looked at Dai. He's never seen him before. “Where are you from, Deacon?” he asked. “What can I do for you?”

Dai greeted him courteously. “I am the deacon of Yue Temple in Tai'an. We're repairing our Five Sacred Mountains Building and our local gentry want a monument carved. They've instructed me to give you fifty ounces of silver to care for your family while you've away and to ask you to come with me to our temple to write the inscription. The opening date has already been set and cannot be postponed.”

“I only write the words on the stone, nothing more. If you're in a hurry for the monument, you'll need an engraver as well.”

“I have another fifty pieces of silver. I intend to invite Jin Dajian the Jade-Armed Craftsman. An auspicious day has already been chosen. Please favor us with your guidance. We'll get Jin and go together.”

Xiao Rang accepted the silver and took Dai to call on Jin. They went past the Confucius Temple and Xiao pointed. “That's Jin coming now.”

Xiao hailed him and introduced him to Dai. He explained what it was that Dai wanted. “The deacon is giving each of us fifty ounces of silver to go with him,” the scholar added.

Jin was pleased at the mention of the money. He and Xiao invited Dai to a tavern for a few cups of wine and some vegetable dishes. Dai gave him the

silver for family expenses.

“The necromancer has selected a lucky day,” the superintendent said. “I'd like both of you to leave with me at once.”

“It's very hot today,” said Xiao. “If we go now we won't get very far, and won't reach any place where we can put up for the night. Why not start tomorrow at the fifth watch? Just call for us and we'll go.”

Jin concurred. “He's right, you know.”

They arranged to leave at dawn, and returned to their homes to prepare. Dai stayed over with Xiao Rang, at the scholar's request.

At dawn the next day Jin, with a bundle of clothes and his tools, called for Xiao and Dai, and they left Jizhou. Before they had gone ten *li* Dai spoke.

“You two masters continue slowly. I mustn't rush you. I'll go on ahead and inform the gentry so that they can come and greet you.” He lengthened his stride and hurried forward.

The two craftsmen, their bundles on their backs, proceeded at a leisurely pace. By early afternoon they had covered about eighty *li*. Suddenly, a shrill whistle ahead broke the stillness, and a band of forty of fifty bold fellows leaped out from concealment on the slope. In the lead was Wang the Stumpy Tiger of Clear Winds Mountain.

“Who are you two?” he called. “Where are you going? Take them, children. We'll eat their hearts with our wine!”

“We're on our way to Tai'an to carve a stone monument,” said Xiao. “We haven't any valuables. Only these clothes.”

“I don't want your valuables or your clothes,” shouted Wang. “It's your clever hearts and livers I'm after as a savoury for my drinks!

Alarmed, Xiao and Jin mustered all their skill with arms. Raising their staves, they charged the Stumpy Tiger. Wang attacked with halberd, and the three fought half a dozen rounds until Wang was forced to turn and flee.

The craftsmen were about to pursue when, on the heights, they heard the crash of gongs. From the left came Guardian of the Clouds Song Wan. From the right came Skyscraper Du Qian. Behind was Zheng Tianshou the Fair-Faced Gentleman and over thirty others. They seized Xiao and Jin and dragged them into the forest.

“Don't worry,” said the four gallants. “We've been ordered by our chieftain Chao Gai to invite you up the mountain to join our band.”

“What use would we be in your stronghold?” said Xiao. “We haven't the strength to strangle a chicken. All we can do is eat.”

“In the first place Military Advisor Wu is your friend and, secondly, we know of your skill with weapons,” said Du Qian. “That's why we sent Dai Zong to your homes to invite you.”

Xiao and Jin looked at each other, speechless. All went together to the tavern of Zhu Gui the Dry-Land Crocodile, where food and drink were served. The same night a boat was called and the party proceeded to Mount Liangshan.

On arrival at the stronghold they were greeted by Chao Gai, Wu Yong and the other chieftains. The two craftsmen were given a feast of welcome and were told about forging the letter from Cai Qing.

“And so we're inviting you two to join us,” the leaders concluded, “and become part of our righteous fraternity.”

The craftsmen clutched Wu Yong anxiously. “We've no objection to staying here,” they said, “but what of our wives and children? When the authorities hear about this they'll surely harm them.”

“Set your minds at ease, brothers,” Wu Yong said. “Tomorrow morning you'll understand.”

That night all drank until it was time to retire.

At daybreak a bandit arrived and reported: “They're here.”

“Please go and receive your families,” Wu Yong sand to Jin and Xiao.

The two men could scarcely believe him. Halfway down the mountain they met sedan chairs coming up, bearing their wives and children. The two questioned them in astonishment.

“After you left, yesterday,” the women related, “these sedan-carriers arrived and said: 'Your husbands are at an inn outside of town suffering from heat stroke. They want you and the children to go there at once and look after them.' But when we left the town they wouldn't let us out of the sedan-chairs, and brought us here.”

Both families had been reunited. Xiao and Jin had nothing to say. They abandoned all hope of leaving and went back up the mountain to join the band.

When the families were settled in, Wu Yong conferred with Xiao on the writing of Cai Jing's reply. As to the seal, Jin said: “I've always been the one who's carved all of Cai Jing's seals, both of his official name and his popular name.”

They set to work and soon finished the letter. A banquet was laid for Dai Zong, who was given detailed instructions. The superintendent bid all farewell and went down the mountain to the Shore of Golden Sands, where a bandit ferried him across to Zhu Gui's tavern. Dai tied the charms to his legs, took leave of Zhu Gui, and strode forth on his journey.

After seeing Dai off to the ferry point, Wu Yong and the other chieftains returned to the mountain fortress and feasted. Suddenly, while they were drinking, Wu Yong uttered a cry of lamentation. Everyone was mystified.

“What's wrong?” they queried.

“That letter I prepared is the death warrant for Dai Zong and Song Jiang!”

“What's the matter with it?” the chieftains asked in alarm.

“I thought only of one thing and forgot another. There's a terrible error in that reply!”

“I wrote exactly in the style of Cai Jing. Not a word was wrong,” said Xiao. “Please tell us, Military Advisor, where was the error?”

“The seal I carved corresponds to Cai's in every detail,” said Jin. “How could anyone see any flaw?”

Wu Yong raised two fingers and revealed the mistake to the assembled warriors. And as a result bold fellows caused havoc in Jiangzhou Town and threw White Dragon Temple into confusion. In a shower of arrows men fled for their lives, in a forest of weapons heroes were saved. What, then, was the error which Wu Yong revealed? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 40
Mount Liangshan Gallants Raid the Execution Grounds
Bold Heroes Meet at White Dragon Temple

Wu Yong explained what was wrong with the letter. “I was careless,” he said. “I didn't see it. The seal reads 'Cai Jing, Member of the Hanlin Academy.' That seal will cause superintendent Dai to stand trial!”

“But that's the seal the premier uses on all his writings and essays,” Jin protested. “The one I carved is exactly the same. What's wrong with it?”

“A father writing to his son would never use his formal title. I forgot about that. When Dai returns to Jiangzhou he'll surely be questioned. If the truth comes out, it will be terrible.”

“Let's send a man after Dai, quickly, and bring him back,” Chao Gai suggested. “We'll re-do the letter.”

“He couldn't catch him. Dai is using his magic travel method. He must have covered five hundred *li* by now. We can't delay. Dai and Song Jiang have to be saved.”

“How can we save them?” asked Chao Gai. “What's your plan?”

Wu Yong spoke softly in Chao Gai's ear for several minutes, concluding with: “Issue the order quietly among our men. Tell them how to act. Instruct them to move promptly, without fail.”

The bold fellows, on receiving their commands, took the implements they needed and went down the mountain that very night. They headed for Jiangzhou. Of that we'll say no more.

Dai returned to Jiangzhou and reported to the prefectural office with the reply within the allotted time. Prefect Cai was very pleased. He rewarded his emissary with three ceremonial beakers of wine. Then he took the letter.

“Did you see the premier?” he asked.

“No,” said Dai. “I only stayed one night, then came directly home.”

The prefect opened the envelope and read:

I have received all your gifts, intact.... As to that demon Song Jiang, the emperor wants to see him personally. Send him to the capital immediately in a cage cart under a trustworthy guard. Make sure he doesn't get away on the road.... I have spoken to the emperor about Huang Wenbing. He undoubtedly will be given a good appointment.

Cai was delighted. He presented Dai with a flowery silver ingot weighing twenty-five ounces. He also ordered that a cage cart be assembled and discussed the guard to be sent. The superintendent thanked him and returned to his quarters. He bought wine and meat and went to see Song Jiang in the prison. We'll say no more of that.

The prefect urged the builders to hurry with the cart. A day or two later, all was in readiness to take the prisoner to the Eastern Capital. The gate-keeper entered and announced that Huang Wenbing was calling.

Cai received him in the rear hall. Huang had brought wine and fresh fruit. “You're always so thoughtful,” murmured the prefect. “You really shouldn't.”

“Meager gifts from my rustic village,” said Huang. “Not worth mentioning.”

“Congratulations on the honors which will soon be yours.”

“What makes you say that, Prefect?”

“I received a reply yesterday. The evil-doer Song Jiang is to be sent to the capital. Your contribution has been reported to the emperor. You will be given a high position. It's all in my father's letter.”

“I'm deeply grateful for Your Excellency's recommendation. Your messenger is indeed a marvellous traveller.”

“Read the letter yourself, if you don't believe me.”

“A private, family letter—I wouldn't have dared ask. But since you permit me....”

“Why not, a trusted friend like you.”

Huang read the letter from start to finish, then turned it over and looked at the seal on the flap. He observed that it had been newly cut. Huang shook his head.

“This letter is a fake.”

“You must be mistaken. It's my father's own handwriting. It must be authentic.”

“His style is easily copied. Did he put this seal on letters to you in the past?”

“No, he just wrote informally. Probably the seal was near at hand and he reached for it automatically.”

“Please don't think I'm being meddlesome, but the letter is a forgery. The styles of writing of Su, Huang, Mi and Cai are very popular these days. Anyone can imitate them. And this seal—it was made when your father became a member of the Hanlin Academy. He affixed it to all his essays and calligraphy. Many people have seen it. But why would he still be using it today, now that he's risen to the position of premier? In any event, a father writing to his son certainly wouldn't add an official signature seal. The premier possesses infinite wisdom and intelligence. He'd never make a mistake like that. If you don't believe me, Prefect, question the messenger closely. Ask him who he saw at the Residence. If he answers incorrectly, then the letter is false. Forgive me for talking so much. It's only because you've been so kind that I dare to speak.”

“That's easy enough. He's never been to the Eastern Capital before, I have only to query him and I'll know whether he's lying.”

The prefect told Huang to conceal himself behind a screen, and he convened court. He then sent attendants out in all direction to look for Dai Zong. They were to say the prefect had need of him, and to report at once.

The day he returned, Dai went to see Song Jiang in the prison and spoke softly in his ear, telling him what had transpired. Song Jiang was very pleased. A man invited Dai out for wine the following day, and he was drinking in a tavern when an attendant, who had been looking for him, came in. He conducted Dai to the prefectural court.

“You certainly did a good job of the mission I troubled you with the other day,” said Prefect Cai. “I still haven't rewarded you properly.”

“When entrusted with a task by Your Excellency, I could only do my best.”

“I've been rather busy lately. I haven't had a chance to ask you about it in detail. By which gate did you go into the capital?”

“It was already dark when I got there. I didn't notice.”

“Who received you at the gate of the family residence? Where did they put you up?”

“A gate-man took your letter in. A short while later he came out and accepted the hampers. He told me to find an inn for the night. I returned to the Residence at dawn the following morning, and the gate man handed me a reply. I wanted to be sure to reach Jiangzhou on time, so I didn't bother to ask questions and hurried back.”

“Did you notice how old the gate-keeper was? Was he dark and thin, or fair and fat? Tall or short? Did he have a beard?”

“It was dark when I reached the Residence, and the next morning at dawn the light was dim. I couldn't see very clearly. He didn't seem very tall, around medium height. I think he had a bit of a beard.”

“Take this man before the court,” the prefect shouted angrily.

A dozen prison guards came out from the side and dragged Dai to the front of the dais.

“I've done no wrong,” the superintendent cried.

“You death-deserving scoundrel! Our old gate-keeper Wang passed on years ago. His son, who has the job now, is only a beardless youth. He has no right to enter the Residence. Any letters that arrive he gives to Secretary Zhang, who hands them over to Majordomo Li. Only Li can notify the inside and accept presents. If a reply is requested, you have to wait three days. And how could anyone who wasn't a trusted attendant and who didn't question you in detail simply take my gifts? My mind was slow the other day. I let you hoodwink me. The truth, now, where did you get that letter?”

“I didn't know all that. I was confused and in a hurry to come back.”

“You're lying. These thieving wretches—if you don't beat them they never confess. Guards, pound this rogue for me, hard!”

The prison guards knew it was hopeless. They couldn't be concerned for their superintendent's dignity. They tired Dai, held him prone, and beat him till his skin split and his fresh blood flowed. Dai couldn't take it. “The letter is false,” he exclaimed. “Where did you get it?” the prefect demanded.

“I was passing through Liangshan Marsh when a gang of brigands seized and bound me. They hauled me up the mountain to cut my heart out. When they searched me, they found and read your letter. They decided to keep the hampers and set me free. But I couldn't come home. I wanted to kill myself. They wrote this letter, figuring it would cover me. I was afraid of being punished, so I deceived you, Excellency.”

“That may be partly true, but plenty of it is poppycock. You're in cahoots with those Liangshan robbers. You plotted with them to steal my hampers, and now you're telling me this fancy tale. Beat him some more!”

But in spite of the torture Dai would not admit to any connection with the men of Liangshan. Again the prefect had him beaten. Dai stuck to his story.

“Enough,” said the prefect. “Put a big rack on him and throw him in jail.”

He left the court and summoned Huang. “If it weren't for your shrewdness I'd have committed a serious blunder,” he said gratefully.

“Dai is obviously also in league with the Liangshan Marsh bandits,” Huang said. “They're organized, and plotting a revolt. It must be nipped in the bud, or it will mean disaster.”

“I'm going to take the confessions of Dai Zong and Song Jiang and draw up formal documents. I'll have them both decapitated in the market-place and then send a written report to the higher authorities.”

“Extremely wise, Excellency. It will please the imperial court and win you high praise for your meritorious handing of this important matter. It will also forestall the Liangshan bandits from coming to raid the prison.”

“You are very far-sighted. I shall write a report personally guaranteeing you and recommending that you be raised in rank.”

Prefect Cai entertained Huang, and saw him to the gate of the prefectural compound. Huang returned to Wuweijun.

The next day Cai opened court, summoned the scribe, also named Huang, and said: “Compile all documents on Song Jiang and Dai Zong and add in their confessions. Also write criminal convictions to be posted on the day they are beheaded in the market-place. Since ancient times, rebellious plotters have been executed promptly. Decapitating these two will avert calamity.”

Scribe Huang was on very good terms with Superintendent Dai. But he had no way to rescue him, and he groaned inwardly.

“Tomorrow is a national day of mourning,” he said, “and the day after is Midsummer Ghosts' Day—you can't execute them then. The following day is a national holiday. Nothing can be done till after the fifth.”

Huang had no better plan, he could only delay Dai's death as long as possible. He did this usually for condemned men whenever he could. The prefect agreed with his suggestion and set the execution date for the sixth.

On the morning of the appointed day a crossroads in the market-place was swept to serve as an execution ground. After breakfast soldiers and executioners were mustered—well over five hundred men—and assembled outside the prison gate. At mid-morning the warden went to the prefect and formally requested him to supervise the beheadings. Scribe Huang had no choice but to present the convictions. On each the word “Decapitate” was inscribed, and the announcements were pasted on reed mats.

Although the head keeper and guards in the city prison-were friends of Dai Zong and Song Jiang, there was nothing they could do to save them. They could only bemoan their fate.

Everything was in readiness. The prisoners' arms were bound, the hair of each was soaked with gluey paste, twisted up in the shape of a pear and

transfixed with a red artificial flower. They were driven before a black-faced idol and fed a bowl of “Eternal Rest Rice” and a cup of “Permanent Parting Wine.” Then they were taken from the shrine. Racks were locked round their necks. Surrounded by sixty or seventy guards, Song Jiang, followed by Dai Zong, were marched out of the prison gate. The two men looked at each other, but they were unable to speak. Song Jiang stamped in futility, Dai Zong hung his head and sighed.

A crowd of nearly two thousand jammed the market-place around the crossroads, which was guarded by a wall of soldiers with spears and staves. Song Jiang was placed facing south, Dai Zong was placed facing north and, still bound, they were forced to sit. All were waiting till three quarters after noon, when the supervisor would come and the executions would take place.

The spectators read the announcements of criminal conviction. They ran as follows:

Jiangzhou Prefecture. Criminal Song Jiang. Wrote a rebellious poem, spread evil rumors, and colluded with bandits in Liangshan Marsh to foment a rebellion. Sentenced to be decapitated.

Criminal Dai Zong. In order to help Song Jiang, secretly handed over a private letter, colluded with the bandits in Liangshan Marsh and plotted with them to foment a rebellion. Sentenced to be decapitated.

Supervisor of executions: Cai, Prefect of Jiangzhou

The prefect reined his horse to a halt and sat, waiting. From the east side of the market a band of snake charmers pushed their way through the crowd. The soldiers tried to beat them back, but they wouldn't leave. In the midst of this disturbance, a group of medical cure pedlars who gave displays of arms elbowed through the spectators on the west.

“You unmannerly louts,” the soldiers shouted at them. “Where do you think you are—shoving like that?”

“Ignorant rustics,” the men retorted. “We've travelled all over the country, and nowhere have we been prohibited from looking at people. Even when the emperor has culprits killed in the capital you're allowed to watch. Just because your little town is executing two men you think you're shaking the world. We want to see. What's all the friggin fuss about?”

“Get back there,” shouted the prefect. “Don't let them come any closer.”

At this moment a convoy of porters, carrying goods on shoulder-poles, arrived from the south.

“Heads are going to be chopped off here,” the soldiers yelled. “Go another way.”

“We're bringing things to your prefect. How dare you stop us?”

“Even if you were officials from the prefectural office, you'd have to detour!”

The porters set down their burdens, detached their carrying-poles, and stood, holding them, among the spectators.

From the north a troupe of merchants approached, pushing two carts. They insisted on passing through the execution grounds.

“Where do you think you're going?” the soldiers barked.

“We're in a hurry. Let us through.”

“Not a chance. Criminals are being knocked off here. If you've in a hurry, take another road.”

The merchants laughed. “That's easy enough to say. We're from the capital. We're not familiar with your cruddy roads. We can only stick to the main highway.”

The soldiers wouldn't let them go on. The merchants crowded together in a stubborn knot and refused to retreat. Arguments were raging on all four sides of the crossroads. Prefect Cai was unable to quell them. He observed that the merchants had climbed onto their carts and were watching from there.

Not long after, the group of officers on the execution grounds parted and a man stepped forward and announced: “Three quarters past noon.”

“Cut off their heads,” ordered the prefect.

Soldiers opened the prisoners' racks. Two executioners stood with swords at the ready. Quicker than it takes to say, rioting broke out. One of the merchants pulled a small gong from his tunic. Standing on the cart he struck it sharply three times. On all sides, men went into action.

A hulking dark tiger of a fellow, stark naked, appeared in the upper story of a tea-house beside the crossroads. Brandishing a battle-ax in each hand, he uttered a heaven-splitting roar, leaped down, hacked the executioners to death, and began carving his way towards the mounted prefect. Soldiers thrust at him with their spears, but nothing could stop his headlong advance. They crowded around Cai and rushed him off to safety.

Daggers suddenly appeared in the hands of the snake charmers on the east side, and they began killing soldiers. The medicine men on the west side, holding spears and staves, let out a yell and charged into the soldiers and guards, slaughtering left and right. On the south, the porters swung their carrying-poles, felling soldiers and spectators indiscriminately. The merchants on the north jumped down from the carts and tipped them over, blocking the road. Two of the merchants darted through the melee and got Song Jiang and Dai Zong on their backs. Some of the remainder produced bows and arrows and started shooting. Others threw stones they had concealed in their clothes. A few waved pennanted signal spears.

The merchants were in fact Chao Gai, Hua Rong, Huang Xin, Lu Fang and Guo Sheng. The medicine men were Yan Shun, Liu Tang, Du Qian and Song Wan. Disguised as porters were Zhu Gui, Stumpy Tiger Wang, Zheng Tianshou and Shi Yong. The snake charmers were actually the three Ruan

brothers and Bai Sheng. These leaders from Liangshan Marsh had brought with them more than a hundred men, and all were locked in furious battle.

They saw the big dark fellow laying about him vigorously with his battle-axes. Chao Gai didn't recognize him, but he knew that he had been the first to go into action, and that he was killing more of the foe than anyone.

“Dai Zong mentioned a Black Whirlwind Li Kui, a wild rash fellow who was good friend of Song Jiang,” Chao Gai recalled, and he shouted: “Hey, bold fighter, aren't you the Black Whirlwind?”

But Li Kui paid no attention, and continued consuming lives with his big axes like a blazing inferno. Chao Gai ordered the men carrying Song Jiang and Dai Zong to follow in the big dark fellow's wake.

By now bodies of soldiers and civilians were sprawled all over the crossroads, and blood flowed in rivulets. Countless more had been felled and wounded. The Liangshan leaders abandoned their carts and merchandise and continued behind the big fellow, fighting their way out of the city. Hua Rong, Huang Xin, Lu Fang and Guo Sheng, covering the rear, sent swarms of arrows in their pursuers. Neither the soldiers nor the people of Jiangzhou dared come too near.

Li Kui slaughtered down to the stream's edge, his whole body spattered with blood. He went on killing along the bank.

Halberd in hand, Chao Gai shouted: “Don't hurt the ordinary people. This has nothing to do with them!”

But the big man wouldn't listen. He cut down victims one after another.

They walked six or seven *li* along the stream outside the city until they saw before them a broad river. Here, all paths came to an end. Chao Gai was very distressed. Only then did Black Whirlwind speak:

“Don't worry. Carry our brothers into that temple.”

Ahead, near the river, was a large temple, its double gates tightly locked. Li Kui smashed them open with his battle-axes, and they all went into the courtyard. Ancient junipers and pines blocked out the sunlight. A plaque upon the building was inscribed in letters of gold: *Temple of the White Dragon Spirit.*

Song Jiang and Dai Zong were carried inside and set down. Song Jiang open his eyes and saw Chao Gai and the others. “Brothers,” he exclaimed, weeping, “this must be a dream.”

“You wouldn't stay with us on the mountain, brother. That's why you're in such a predicament today,” Chao Gai expostulated. “Who is that big swarthy fellow who fights so powerfully?”

“Li Kui the Black Whirlwind. He was ready to spring me out of prison all by himself. But I didn't think we could get away with it, so I didn't agree.”

“A remarkable man. He fought harder than any of us, and was absolutely fearless in the face of every enemy weapon.”

“Bring fresh clothing for our brothers,” Hua Rong called.

While they were changing, Li Kui started down the porch, battle-axes in hand. Song Jiang shouted after him: “Where are you going, brother?”

“Looking for those monks. I'll kill them all. Not only didn't the louts come out to welcome us, they even barred their friggin gates. If I find them, I'll slay them before those gates as a sacrifice!”

“Come over here, first. I want to introduce you to my brother, the chieftain.”

Li Kui cast aside his axes and dropped to his knees before Chao Gai. “Forgive Iron Ox's crassness, brother,” he entreated. He was also introduced to the others and discovered he and Zhu Gui came from the same township. Both men were exceedingly pleased.

“Brother,” Hua Rong said to Chao Gai, “you told us to follow brother Li, and now here we are, with a big river cutting us off, and no boat to take us across. When the soldiers from the city catch up how will we be able to repel them and escape?”

“Never mind,” said Li Kui. “I'll fight my way back into the city and chop them into mincemeat, friggin prefect and all!”

Dai Zong had just revived by then, and he cried: “Don't be rash, brother. There are six or seven thousand troops in the city. If you go charging in you'll be throwing your life away.”

Ruan the Seventh said: “I see some boats along the opposite bank. My brothers and I will swim over and haul a few back. How will that be?”

“The best possible idea,” said Chao Gai.

Stripping and tying on daggers, the Ruan brothers dived into the river. They had swum about half a *li* when three boats, being rowed with the speed of wind, prows raised, came flying across the surface of the water. On each were a dozen or more men, all with weapons in their hands.

The watchers on the shore grew alarmed. “My fate is bitter,” Song Jiang lamented when he heard of the approaching vessels. He hurried out of the temple to look. Seated in the foremost craft was a big fellow holding a five-pronged pitchfork. His hair was twisted up on top of his head and bound by a red cord. He wore a pair of white silk swimming pants, and he was whistling sharply.

It was none other than Zhang Shun. Song Jiang waved his arms and shouted: “Save me, brother!”

Zhang Shun and the others recognized him. “We will,” they cried.

Their boats flew towards the shore. The Ruan brothers turned around and swam back. All headed for the bank before the temple.

Zhang Shun was leading a dozen sturdy fellows. Zhang Heng, on the second craft, led Mu Hong, Mu Chun, Xue Yong and ten or more vassals. On the third boat Li Jun was in command of LiLi, Tong Wei, Tong Meng and a dozen salt smugglers. Fully armed, they disembarked and climbed the bank.

To Zhang Shun the sight of Song Jiang was a gift from heaven. Weeping, he kowtowed and said: “I was beside myself when I heard that you had been tried. But I couldn't think of how rescue you. Then I heard that Superintendent Dai had been taken, and brother Li Kui had disappeared. I went to my brother Zhang Heng and took him so Squire Mu's manor and called together many of our friends. Today we were going to fight our way into Jiangzhou and snatch you out of prison. I never dreamed that gallant men would have saved you already and brought you here. May I ask which of these heroes is Chao Gai, chieftain of Liangshan Marsh?”

Song Jiang pointed to a man standing to the fore. “That is brother Chao Gai. Let's all go into the temple and be ceremoniously introduced.”

The nine leaders of Zhang Shun's party, the seventeen of Chao Gai's, plus Song Jiang, Dai Zong and Li Kui, a total of twenty-nine, entered the White Dragon Temple. This event later became known as the “White Dragon Temple Small Meeting.”

Shortly after the twenty-nine had exchanged formal greetings, one of the bandits hurried in and reported: “In Jiangzhou City, to the beating of gongs and drums, a huge host of men and horses has been assembled and are marching forth to catch us. You can see them in the distance, their flags covering the sky, their swords thick as flax. Armored horses are in the lead, followed by hordes of spearsmen. With great swords and broad axes they're speeding down the road to White Dragon Temple!”

“Let me at them!” Li Kui roared. He seized his twin axes and rushed through the temple gates.

“If we fight, we fight to a finish,” shouted Chao Gai. “Rally round me, bold fellows. We'll return to Liangshan Marsh only after we've slaughtered every man of Jiangzhou's army!”

“We're at you orders!” responded the assembled heroes.

A hundred and forty-five men charged, yelling, to the river bank.

And as a result the waves were encrimsoned and corpses were piled mountain-high. Truly, wave-leaping dragons spewed poisonous flames, mountain-climbing tigers roared gales into the sky.

How did Chao Gai and his gallant band make their escape? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 41
Song Jiang Cleverly Takes Wuweijun
Zhang Shun Captures Huang Wenbing

Liu Tang and Zhu Gui escorted Song Jiang and Dai Zong on board. Li Jun, Zhang Shun and the three Ruan brothers put the boats in order. From the river's edge they could see the government troops advancing from the city, six or seven thousand strong. The cavalrymen in the van wore helmets and armor. They were equipped with bows and arrows and carried long lances. Behind them hordes of foot soldiers, shouting and waving banners, surged fiercely forward.

Li Kui, stark naked, dashed towards them, brandishing his axes. He was closely followed by Hua Rong, Huang Xin, Lu Fang and Guo Sheng. Eyeing the bristling lances of the cavalry ahead, Hua Rong feared for Li Kui's safety. He quietly pulled out his bow, fitted an arrow, stretched the string to its utmost, and let fly at the commander of the horsemen. The whistling shaft brought him tumbling to the ground. Startled, the cavalrymen pulled their mounts around and fled for their lives, knocking down half the infantry in the process.

At this point, the bold gallants charged. They slaughtered the government troops till bodies littered the plain and the river was dyed red with blood, and fought to the city walls of Jiangzhou. From the ramparts the defenders flung down logs and bombarded them with ballista stones, covering the frantic retreat into the city of the last of the government troops. Then the big gates were barred. For several days no one dared to come out.

The bold fighters, pulling Black Whirlwind back with them, returned to the boats before the White Dragon Temple. Chao Gai reassembled his forces and ordered all men on board. The three craft shoved off. Sails were raised to catch a favorable wind. Filled with fighters and commanders, the boats headed for the manor of Squire Mu. An uneventful journey brought them to his dock, where they disembarked.

Mu Hong invited them into the inner hall of the manor. Squire Mu emerged and greeted Song Jiang and his companions.

“You chieftains have had a hard night,” the old man said. “Please avail yourselves of our guest house and rest.”

The visitors retired to rooms provided, where they rested and mended their clothing and weapons. Mu Hong instructed his vassals to kill a yellow ox, a dozen pigs and sheep, as well as chickens, geese, fish and ducks, and prepare rare and tasty dishes for a feast in honor of his guests.

During the drinking, many details were recalled. Chao Gai said to the two Mu brothers: “If you hadn't come to our rescue in your boats we'd surely have landed in their net.”

“What made you choose that road out of the city in the first place?” Squire Mu queried.

“I went to fight wherever people were thickest, and these fellows followed,” Li Kui explained. “I didn't ask them to.”

Everybody laughed.

Song Jiang rose and addressed the assembly. “Superintendent Dai and I would be dead now if you hadn't come to our rescue. Our gratitude is as deep as the sea. We don't know how to thank you. I hate only Huang Wenbing. That villain did nothing but pick fault and spread slanders. He tried to ruin us. I must have vengeance. I beg you bold gallants to do me a great favor once again and attack Wuweijun, kill Huang Wenbing and slake Song Jiang's burning hatred. What do you say?”

“We can't get away with another sneak raid,” mused Chao Gai. “How shall we proceed? Those treacherous scoundrels will be on their guard. Perhaps we should return to the mountain stronghold and muster a larger force. We'll get Wu Yong, Gongsun, Lin Chong and Qin Ming to join us. There's still time.”

“If you go back, you won't be able to come again,” Song Jiang said. “In the first place, it's too far. In the second place, the Jiangzhou Prefecture will surely warn all districts to be on the alert. We have to strike now, before they have a chance to get ready.”

“You're quite right,” said Hua Rong. “The problem is we have no one who is familiar with the roads and terrain. We'll send a man into Wuweijun first, to reconnoiter. We've got to know how to get in and out of there and where, exactly, Huang Wenbing lives. Then we can make our move.”

Xue Yong stood up. “I've been around a lot. I know Wuweijun better than any of you. Why not let me go in and see what I can find out?”

“If you would, brother,” said Song Jiang, “that would be fine.”

Xue Yong took his leave that same day, and departed.

Song Jiang and the brigand leaders remained in Mu Hong's manor and discussed the attack on Wuweijun. They put their lances and swords in order, arranged their bows and arrows, accumulated boats large and small, and made preparations. Two days later, Xue Yong returned, bringing with him a man he presented to Song Jiang.

“Who is this brave fellow?” Song Jiang asked.

“His name is Hou Jian, and his home town is Hongdu. He's a first-rate tailor. Needle and thread in his bands really fly. He's also good with lance and staff, a skill which I have taught him. Because he's dark and thin and agile, people call him the Long-Armed Ape. At the moment, he's doing some tailoring in the home of Huang Wenbing. I happened to run into him, and brought him here.”

Song Jiang was very pleased. He invited the man to be seated. Hou Jian was one of the stars of Earthly Fiends. The loyalty between him and Song Jiang was immediate and natural. Song Jiang asked for news about Jiangzhou and the terrain in and around Wuweijun.

“Prefect Cai tallied his soldier and civilian losses. There are more than five hundred dead and countless wounded by arrows,” Xue Yong said. “He's rushed a messenger off to report to the throne. The Jiangzhou city gates are shut every day from noon on. Anybody going in or out is questioned closely. The harm done to you, brother, is not Prefect Cai's fault. Each time he acted against you and the Superintendent, it was at the instigation of Huang Wenbing. Since our raid on the execution grounds, Jiangzhou has been in chaos. It's patrolled night and day. When I was inquiring in Wuweijun, I met this brother as he was coming out to eat. I got the details from him.”

“How do you know all this, brother Hou?” Song Jiang asked. “Since childhood I have loved jousting with lance and staff,” said Hou Jian. “I owe much to Teacher Xue's instructions. That is something I shall never forget. The last few days I have been doing some tailoring in the home of Huang Wenbing. Coming out, I ran into Teacher. He mentioned your great name and told me what has been going on. I've always wanted to meet you, so I took this opportunity to come and report in full.

“Huang Wenbing has an older brother, Huang Wenye. Both are sons of the same mother. Wenye is a good man. He repairs bridges and lays roads, builds idols and sustains monks, rescues the endangered and succors the poor. For this reason he is known in Wuweijun as Huang the Buddha. But Huang Wenbing, although he was once a deputy prefect, is vicious and cruel. In Wuweijun they call him Huang the Wasp. The brothers live in two separate compounds near the town's North Gate, but their entrances are in the same lane. Huang Wenbing's compound is right up against the town wall. Wenye's is due south, and borders on a large street.

“When I was working there, I heard Wenbing come home and say: “They fooled the prefect. I exposed their trick and advised him to cut off their heads first, and then report to the imperial court.' Wenye criticized him behind his back. He said: 'What a disgraceful thing to do. It's none of his

affair. Why should he want to harm them? If there's any justice in Heaven, retribution is bound to follow. He's bringing disaster down on his own head.' When the Wasp heard of the raid on the execution grounds he became very alarmed. Last night he went into Jiangzhou to see the prefect and make plans. He still hasn't returned."

"How far is the Wasp's house from his brother's?" Song Jiang asked.

"Originally, it was all one compound. It's divided into two, now, separated by a vegetable garden."

"How many people in Huang the Wasp's home? How many families are there?"

"Male and female, forty or fifty."

"Heaven has willed that I shall have my revenge and has sent me this man," cried Song Jiang. He turned to his cohorts, "I rely entirely on your support, brothers."

"We'll go through with it though we die! We'll destroy that deceitful villain and wipe your slate of vengeance clean."

"It's only the Wasp I hate. This has nothing to do with the people of Wuweijun. Since his brother is virtuous, you must not harm him, or people will revile us for lacking benevolence. And not the slightest injury may be done to the citizenry. I have a plan. I hope you brothers will assist me."

"We await your instructions."

"If I may trouble Squire Mu, I would like eighty or ninety gunny sacks and a hundred or so bundles of reeds and faggots, plus five large boats and two small. I'd like Zhang Shun and Li Jun to handle the two small boats. Zhang Heng, the three Ruan brothers and Tong Wei will be in charge of the five large craft and man them with good swimmers. This is essential."

"We have here all the reeds, oil-soaked faggots, and sacks you can use. Every man in the manor can swim and handle a boat. Just take what you

want," said Mu Hong.

"Brother Hou will first conduct Xue Yong and Bai Sheng into Wuweijun and conceal them there. The next day at the second interval of the third watch when they hear the tinkling of a belled pigeon which we'll release outside the town gate, Bai Sheng will mount the wall and stick a white pennant on a pole at a point nearest to the Wasp's house. That is where we'll climb the town wall."

Song Jiang continued: "Shi Yong and Du Qian, disguised as beggars, will also hide inside the town, near the gate. As soon as they see flames rising, they will kill the gate guards. Li Jun and Zhang Shun will patrol the river in their small craft and be ready for action."

Song Jiang finished making his disposition. Xue Yong, Bai Sheng and Hou Jian left first. Shi Yong and Du Qian disguised themselves as beggars, concealed daggers on their persons, and followed. The large boats were laden with sand-filled sacks, reeds and oil-soaked faggots. When the time came, each of the bold leaders girded up his clothing and readied his weapons. The fighting men hid in the holds.

Then the chieftains went on board. Chao Gai, Song Jiang and Hua Rong were on Tong Wei's craft. Yan Shun, Wang the Stumpy Tiger and Zheng Tianshou were on Zhang Heng's craft. Dai Zong, Liu Tang and Huang Xin joined Ruan the Second. Lu Fang, Guo Sheng and LiLi were with Ruan the Fifth. Mu Hong, Mu Chun and Li Kui went with Ruan the Seventh. Only Zhu Gui and Song Wan remained in Squire Mu's manor. Their job was to watch for possible developments in Jiangzhou. Tong Meng went ahead in a fast fishing craft to scout the town.

The brigands and fighters crouched in the holds. Peasants, vassals and boatmen manned the oars. Stealthily through the darkness the vessels advanced on Wuweijun.

It was the seventh lunar month, a still, windless night. A bright moon shone on the clear waters, which reflected on their jade surface the dark green shadows of the mountains. By the first watch the craft, large and small, had

reached the banks of the Wuwei River, and were moored in a line deep in the reeds. Tong Meng returned in his fast little boat.

“All quiet in the town,” he reported.

Song Jiang ordered his men to unload the sandbags and reeds and dry faggots onto the bank. He scrutinized the town wall. When the watchman's drum beat out the commencement of the second watch, Song Jiang directed the brigands to shift the bags and reeds to near the wall. The bold gallants had their weapons in hand. With the exception of Zhang Heng, the three Ruan brothers and the two brothers Tong, who were left to guard the boats, all moved towards the wall of the town.

About half a *li* from the North Gate, Song Jiang directed that a belled pigeon be released. Atop the wall a white pennant on a bamboo pole suddenly appeared fluttering in the breeze. Song Jiang ordered his men to pile the sandbags at that point against the wall, and told the fighters to climb up with the reeds and oil-soaked faggots.

Bai Sheng met them on the ramparts. He pointed downwards inside the town.

“Huang the Wasp lives in that lane.”

“Where are Xue Yong and Hou Jian?” Song Jiang queried.

“Concealed in the Wasp's compound, waiting for you.”

“Have you seen Shi Yong and Du Qian?”

“They're hiding beside the town gate.”

Song Jiang led his men down the wall into the town and proceeded to the door of the Wasp's compound. Hou Jian was lurking beneath the overhanging eaves. Song Jiang summoned him softly.

“Open the door of the vegetable garden, and the men will pile the reeds and faggots inside. Tell Xue Yong to set them ablaze, then knock on the Wasp's door and say: 'Your neighbor's house is on fire! We've brought crates of his

belongings here for safekeeping!' When they open the door I've arranged what to do next."

Song Jiang sent two groups of men to guard both ends of the lane. Hou Jian opened the door of the vegetable garden and the fighters brought in the reeds and faggots and laid them in a pile. He handed fire-making materials to Xue Yong, who lit the reeds. Hou Jian rushed out and pounded on Huang Wenbing's door.

"Your neighbor's house is on fire! We've brought crates of his belongings here for safekeeping. Open up, quick!"

Those inside could see the flames rising in the next compound, and they hastily opened the door. Chao Gai, Song Jiang and the others charged in, yelling fiercely. They killed everyone in sight, a total of nearly fifty persons, young and old. Not a single one was spared. But the Wasp was not at home.

The bold gallants collected all the money and valuables Huang had extorted from innocent people. A loud whistle, and the brigands shouldered crates and hampers of booty on carrying-poles and mounted the ramp to the top of the town wall.

When Shi Yong and Du Qian saw the fire they pulled out their daggers and killed the soldiers guarding the gate. Neighbors hurried along the street with buckets and ladders to fight the blaze.

"Stop where you are," Shi Yong and Du Qian shouted. "There are thousands of us here from Liangshan Marsh. We're wiping out Huang the Wasp's family, one and all, to avenge Song Jiang and Dai Zong. This has nothing to do with you. Go home and hide. Don't interfere in things that are none of your business."

Some of the neighbors weren't convinced, and stood watching. But when they saw Black Whirlwind Li Kui rolling towards them brandishing his axes, they cried out in dismay, picked up their ladders and buckets, and fled.

In the rear lane was a contingent of soldiers who guarded the town gate. Many of them rushed forward with empty sacks and barbed poles to extinguish the flames. Hua Rong quickly bent his bow and sped an arrow into the man in the lead. He stumbled to the ground.

“Anyone who wants to die, come fight the fire,” Hua Rong shouted. The soldiers retreated in a body.

Xue Yong set every part of Huang the Wasp's compound to the torch. It was soon being consumed by crackling flames.

By then Li Kui had smashed the lock and opened the town gate. Half the raiders left through this exit. The other half went over the wall. They were met by the three Ruan brothers, Zhang Heng and the two Tong brothers. The crates and hampers of booty were loaded onto the craft. It was already known in Wuweijun that the gallants of Liangshan Marsh had snatched the proposed victims from the execution grounds in Jiangzhou and slaughtered many people. Who would dare now to pursue them? Everyone stayed out of their way.

Bitterly disappointed that they hadn't taken Huang the Wasp, Song Jiang and his brave company boarded the vessels and rowed towards Mu Hong's manor. Of this we'll say no more.

The flames in Wuweijun, encrimsoning the night sky, stirred excited conversation all over the city of Jiangzhou. A report was made to the prefect. Huang the Wasp, who was at that moment with the official, became disturbed.

“There's a fire in my town. I'd better go home and look after things.”

Prefect Cai ordered that the city gate be opened to let Huang out and that a government boat take him across the river. Huang thanked the prefect and departed. With his retainer he hastily boarded the craft and set out. From the river he stared at Wuweijun. The flames were burning fiercely, reflecting red on the surface of the water.

“That fire's near the North Gate,” one of the boatmen said.

Huang grew more agitated. As they approached the center of the river, a small craft was seen rowing past them. Shortly after, another little boat appeared. Instead of passing, it proceeded directly in the path of the government vessel.

“Who are you?” the retainer shouted angrily. “Veer off!”

A big fellow jumped up in the small boat. He had a grappling hook in his hands. “I've been ordered to Jiangzhou to report on the fire,” he said.

Huang popped out of the cabin. “Where is it?”

“North Gate. Huang the Wasp's whole family has been slaughtered by bold fellows from Liangshan Marsh. They've taken all of his valuables and set the place to the torch.”

Huang groaned. He was absolutely stunned. The man snagged the boat with his hook and jumped on board. Huang was a very sharp person. He immediately sensed that something was wrong. He darted to the stern and dived into the river.

But a man from the other little boat was waiting for him underwater. He seized Huang around the middle and hauled him back to the government vessel. The big fellow helped heave him on deck, then bound him securely with rope. Zhang Shun the White Streak in the Waves had made the underwater capture. Li Jun the Turbulent River Dragon was the big man with the grappling hook. They now both stood on the deck of the government craft. The official boatmen fervently kowtowed.

“We're not going to kill you,” Li Jun assured them. “We only want this scoundrel Huang the Wasp. Go back and tell that thieving donkey of a prefect the gallants of Liangshan Marsh will let him keep his head for the time being. But sooner or later we're coming to collect it.”

“We'll do that,” the trembling boatmen stammered.

Zhang Shun transferred the prisoner to his own craft and let the government vessel depart. The two bold fellows sculled their swift little boats towards

the manor. They found the chieftains waiting for them on the bank, where the crates and hampers were being unloaded. Song Jiang was beside himself with joy when he saw that Huang had been captured.

“Just the man we've been looking for,” the assembled gallants exclaimed.

Li Jun and Zhang Shun brought Huang ashore. Surrounded by the whole company, he was taken to the manor. Zhu Gui and Song Wan greeted the returning raiders. All went into the thatch-roofed hall and sat down.

Song Jiang stripped Huang of his wet clothes, tied him to a willow tree, and asked the leaders to sit around in a circle. He called for a pot of wine and cups for all. From Chao Gai the highest to the lowest-ranking Bai Sheng, they totalled thirty bold gallants. When the cups were filled, Song Jiang turned to his captive.

“Huang Wenbing, you knave! I've never done anything against you. Why should you want to harm me? Four or five times, you tried to get Prefect Cai to kill me and Dai Zong. A man who's studied the books of the sages—how could you be so vicious? There's no terrible blood feud between us. Why have you conspired against me? Your brother Huang Wenye was born of the same mother, yet he's a kindly man. The folk in your town call him Huang the Buddha. Last night I ordered that he was not to be disturbed. But you, you rogue, do nothing but injure people! You tie up with the powerful, inveigle yourself in with officials, and persecute the innocent. In Wuweijun you're known as Huang the Wasp. Well, today I'm going to remove your sting!”

“I acknowledge my crimes,” said Huang. “I ask only for a quick death.”

“Thieving donkey,” shouted Chao Gai. “You're going to die, never fear. You wouldn't have behaved as you did if you knew this day of reckoning was at hand.”

“Which one of you brothers will do the deed for me?” Song Jiang asked.

Li Kui the Black Whirlwind leaped forward. “I'll slice the villain for you, brother.”

He took a sharp knife, looked at Huang and laughed. “In the prefect's rear hall you lied and slandered, stirred him up, invented stories out of whole cloth, deceived him. So you want a quick death? I'm going to see to it that you die slowly.”

He started by carving the prisoner's legs. It wasn't long before he had sliced him to ribbons. Only then did Li Kui cut open Huang's chest, pull out his heart and hold it up for the assembled gallants to see.

All returned to the thatch-roofed hall and congratulated Song Jiang. To their astonishment he dropped to his knees. They hastily knelt with him.

“What is it?” they cried. “Speak freely. There's nothing we're not willing to hear.”

“I'm a person of no talent, only a clerk. But I've always tried to be good to people and make friends with the bold and gallant. Unfortunately, lacking the strength and the ability, I have never been able to treat them as is their due and satisfy my life-long wish. When I was being exiled to Jiangzhou, Chao Gai and you other chieftains urged me to remain with you. But because of my father's strict instructions I was unable to do so. Later, I had a Heaven-sent opportunity to meet another band of heroes at the Xunyang River. Who would have thought that in my ignorance I would get drunk and write wild words and put Superintendent Dai's life in jeopardy? With fearless disregard of danger, you gallants snatched me from the tiger's den, the dragon's lair, and saved my wretched life. And now you have graciously helped me get my revenge.

“But we have committed great crimes, and caused turmoil in two prefectural towns. This will surely be reported to the emperor. I have no choice but to join you brothers in Liangshan Marsh. What about the rest of you? If you feel the same, gather your belongings and we'll go together. If there are some who don't wish to go, I await your orders. It's just that I'm afraid this is going to stir up a tremendous reaction....”

“We'll all go,” Li Kui interrupted. “Anyone who refuses gets a knock from my friggin ax. I'll cut him in two.”

“How can you speak so crudely? Each brother must make up his own mind.”

The men conferred. “We've slaughtered scores of officers and soldiers and thrown two towns into disorder. The prefect is bound to report to the imperial court, which is sure to send an army to capture us,” they said. “If we don't leave with brother Song Jiang, to live and die together, where else can we go?”

Very pleased, Song Jiang thanked them. That same day Zhu Gui and Song Wan were sent ahead to inform the mountain stronghold.

The marchers were divided into five units. In the first were Chao Gai, Song Jiang, Hua Rong, Dai Zong and Li Kui. In the second were Liu Tang, Du Qian, Shi Yong, Xue Yong and Hou Jian. In the third were Li Jun, LiLi, Lu Fang, Guo Sheng, Tong Wei and Tong Meng. In the fourth were Huang Xin, Zhang Shun, Zhang Heng, and the three Ruan brothers. In the fifth were Mu Hong, Mu Chun, Yan Shun, Stumpy Tiger Wang, Zheng Tianshou and Bai Sheng. These twenty-eight leaders and some of the men divided the booty taken at Huang the Wasp's house and loaded it onto carts.

Mu Hong also put Squire Mu and the entire household in vehicles, along with family valuables and possession. Vassals who did not want to go along were given silver and told to find other masters. Those who did joined the party. The first four units had already set out. Mu Hong issued a dozen torches, set fire to the manor, left his fields, and headed for Liangshan Marsh.

One behind another, the units proceeded, separated by intervals of about twenty *li*. We'll speak now of the first unit, led by Chao Gai. Song Jiang, Hua Rong, Dai Zong and Li Kui, all mounted, and followed by a body of men and carts. Oh the third day of the march they came to a place called Yellow Gate Mountain.

“An evil-looking mountain,” Song Jiang said to Chao Gai. “It must be infested with bandits. We'd better send someone to urge the rear units to catch up before we go on.”

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when drums beat and gongs clashed in a gap in the mountain. “What did I tell you?” exclaimed Song Jiang. “We'll halt right here. When the rest of our force joins us we'll deal with those louts.”

Hua Rong fitted an arrow to his bow, Chao Gai and Dai Zong each clutched halberds. Li Kui held his axes. They gathered protectively around Song Jiang and urged their mounts forward. Four or five hundred bandits came riding down the slope, with four bold fellows at their head each with a weapon in hand.

“You rioted in Jiangzhou, raided Wuweijun, slaughtered government soldiers and people. You still hope to return to Liangshan Marsh?” the four shouted. “We've been waiting for you a long time. Leave us Song Jiang, if you have any sense, and we'll let you live.”

Song Jiang stepped out and knelt upon the ground. “There were persons who injured me, Song Jiang, but I could not redress my grievances. Then, gallant men came from all sides and rescued me. Have I offended you four heroes in some way? Restrain your noble hands. Forgive and spare me, I pray.”

The four rolled from their saddles, cast their weapons aside, flew forward and dropped to their knees. “We have heard of the great fame of Song Jiang the Timely Rain from Shandong. Though we longed to meet you, it was never possible. Then we heard that you had been convicted in Jiangzhou, and we decided to raid the prison. But we couldn't get any reliable news. The other day we sent one of our men into the city to inquire. He came back and said: 'A large band of bold fellows has already rioted in Jiangzhou and snatched him from the execution grounds. They took him to Jieyang Town. After that, they set fires in Wuweijun and plundered the home of Huang the Wasp.' We figured you must pass this way, and we've had scouts on the lookout. But we weren't sure these were your rescuers, so we put on this little show. Forgive us if we've alarmed you, brother. Today we meet at last. We've prepared some poor fare in our small stronghold as a welcome. Won't you and your gallant escort join with us a while?”

Song Jiang was very pleased. He helped the four to their feet and asked their names. The leader was called Ou Peng, and he came from Huangzhou. He had been a military guard on the Yangzi. But because he had offended his superior officer, he was forced to flee and become a bandit. He had earned himself the nickname Golden Wings Brushing the Clouds.

The second was Jiang Jing, from Tanzhou in Hunan. Originally he had studied for the imperial examinations. But when he failed to pass, he abandoned the pen and took up the sword. A clever fellow, he was a skilled mathematician. In ten thousand calculations, he was never off an iota. He was also good with lance and staff, and a sharp tactician in battle. And so he was known as the Magic Calculator.

The third was Ma Lin, from Jinling in Jiankang. He had been an idler who played the double flute. But when he wielded his big skewer knife, a hundred men couldn't come near him. People called him the Elfin Flutist.

Tao Zongwang, the fourth man, was from Guangzhou. His family were tenant farmers. He could ply an iron spade and was very strong. He was skilled also with spear and knife, and was known as the Nine-Tailed Tortoise.

These four bold fellows welcomed Song Jiang, and their underlings brought forth tidbits, a large pot of wine and two platters of meat and laid them out and poured the wine. The cups were handed first to Chao Gai and Song Jiang, then to Hua Rong, Dai Zong and Li Kui. The rest of the unit were introduced, and they were also served wine.

In less than two watches the second unit arrived, and its leaders were introduced. After all had been given wine, they were invited up the mountain, and the ten chieftains proceeded to the stronghold on Yellow Gate Mountain. The four leaders ordered that cows and horses be slaughtered to feed their guests. Bandits were sent down the mountain to invite the other eighteen chieftains to the feast when the remaining three units arrived. Before half the day was gone, they too had come and met their hosts at the festive board in the meeting hall of the fortress.

While they were drinking, Song Jiang said to the four leaders: “I'm on my way to join the forces of brother Chao Gai on Mount Liangshan. I wonder whether you would be willing to abandon this place and come with me?”

“If you two noble warriors don't scorn us as unworthy, we would be pleased to serve as your grooms.”

Song Jiang and Chao Gai were delighted. “In that case,” they said, “please prepare to depart.”

All of the chieftains were glad, and they spent the night in the stronghold.

The next day Song Jiang and Chao Gai went down the mountain and set forth as heads of the first unit, as before. The other units followed, keeping a distance of twenty *li* between each. Collecting their valuables, the four leaders and their four or five hundred men burned down the Yellow Gate Fortress and brought up the rear as the sixth unit.

Song Jiang was happy they had joined. As he rode along he said to Chao Gai: “Although I've had some alarming experiences since taking to outlawry, I've come to know many good fellows. Today, I'm going with you, brother, to the mountain stronghold and my mind is settled. We'll live and die together.”

They chatted of many things upon the road. Before they knew it, they reached Zhu Gui's inn.

Wu Yong, Gongsun Sheng, Lin Chong and Qin Ming, who had remained in charge of the fortress, and two new arrivals Xiao Rang and Jin Dajian, had already been informed by Zhu Gui and Song Wan of their impending arrival. They sent a lesser chieftain every day by boat to the inn to meet them. Now, they proceeded with him to the Shore of Golden Sands. To the thunder of drums and the tootling of flutes, the returning chieftains mounted horses and sedan-chairs and commenced the climb.

At the pass they were greeted with wine by Wu Yong and the other five. All then proceeded to Fraternity Hall, where a burner of good incense was lit.

Chao Gai requested Song Jiang to take the seat of highest leadership. Song Jiang wouldn't hear of it.

“You mustn't do this, brother,” he protested. “I owe my life to the fearless rescue by you gallants. You, brother, are the leader of this stronghold. How can you relinquish it to a man of no talent? I'd rather die than accept.”

“Don't talk like that, brother,” Chao Gai responded. “We seven wouldn't even be here if you hadn't waded through a sea of blood to save us and brought us up the mountain. You are the rightful benevolent leader. No one is better qualified to take the chair.”

“But you are my senior, a man of sixty years. I'd be ashamed.” Song Jiang pushed Chao Gai into the first chair. He himself sat down in the second. Wu Yong sat in the third chair, Gongsun Sheng in the fourth.

“Old leaders take seats on the left as hosts, new on the right as guests, without regard to merit or rank.” Song Jiang directed. “We'll see how you distinguish yourselves in future engagements, and then decide.”

“Very fitting,” the others agreed.

Amid the sounding of horns and beating of drums, a total of forty leaders feasted and celebrated.

Song Jiang spoke of the story invented about him by Prefect Cai of Jiangzhou. “And all because that rogue Huang the Wasp, although it had nothing to do with him, made his own interpretation of the jingle the children were chanting in the streets of the capital,” Song said. “He told the prefect: *'The destroyer of our country is home and tree.* Put the top of the character for “home” over the character for “tree" and you've got the character “Song.” He's the man who'll pillage our country's money and grain. *Water and work are armed soldiery.* Place the “water” radical next to the character for “work” and you've got “Jiang,” the man who will raise armed soldiers. It fits Song Jiang perfectly. As to the last two lines *Stretched in a line are thirty-six, Shandong will put us in a terrible fix,* that refers to the fact that chief rebel Song Jiang comes from Shandong.'

“For this reason I was arrested. Then Superintendent Dai came with the false letter, and Huang talked the prefect into beheading us first and reporting to the imperial court second. If you bold gallants hadn't rescued us, we wouldn't be here today.”

Li Kui jumped to his feet. “Good. Brother fits the Heavenly prediction exactly. Although he had to suffer because of Huang, he had the pleasure of watching me carve him to pieces. We've lots of men and horses. Let's rebel! What's there to be afraid of? Brother Chao Gai will be Emperor of Greater Song, brother Song Jiang will be Emperor of Lesser Song. Wu Yong will be Premier, Gongsun will be Commander-in-Chief, and we'll all be generals. We'll slaughter our way into the Easter Capital, seize the friggin throne, and rejoice! It will be great! Much better than this friggin marsh!”

“Iron Ox,” Dai Zong cried, “you're talking nonsense. You can't behave here like you did in Jiangzhou. You must take orders from these two brothers who are our leaders, and not be forever shooting off your mouth. If you keep interrupting like this, we'll cut your head off as a warning to others.”

“Aiya, if you do that, it will take me a long time to grow another. All right, I'll just drink my wine and be quiet.”

Everybody laughed. Song Jiang harked back to the time of their first battle with government soldiers.

“I was terrified when I heard they were going after you,” he said to Chao Gai. “Who would have thought that it would be my turn next.”

“You would have saved yourself a good deal of trouble if you remained here on the mountain with us, as we urged, instead of going to Jiangzhou,” Wu Yong reminded him. “But everything happens according to Heaven's will.”

“Where is that knave Colonel Huang An today?”

“He fell ill and died two or three months after.”

Song Jiang sighed. That day, all ate, drank and were merry. Chao Gai first saw to it that Squire Mu and his household were settled in, then divided Huang the Wasp's family valuables among the lesser bandits who had done well, and gave to Dai Zong the hampers of gifts he had been taking to the capital for the prefect. Dai refused to accept. He insisted on contributing them to the general treasury.

Chao Gai introduced Li Jun and the other new leaders to the rank and file, who greeted them respectfully. Oxen and horses were slaughtered for several days in a row for the feasting and celebration. Of that we'll say no more.

At Chao Gai's orders, homes were provided on the front and rear of the mountain, more buildings were erected inside the fortress, and the fortifications were strengthened. On the third day of feasting, Song Jiang rose and addressed the other chieftains:

“I have an important matter to attend to. I wonder if you would allow me to leave for a few days?”

“What is it, brother?” asked Chao Gai. “Where do you wish to go?” Calmly, Song Jiang replied. And as a result, he barely escaped with his life from a forest of knives, and on a mountainside he received a revelation of immortality.

Truly, because the goddess gave him the three books, he was able to create several fine pages in history.

Where was it that Song Jiang wished to go? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 42
Song Jiang Meets the Mystic Queen of Ninth Heaven In Circular Road Village He Receives Three Heavenly Books

“You have escorted me to this stronghold and feasted me for several days. I've been happy,” said Song Jiang. “But I keep wondering about my old

father at home. When Jiangzhou reports to the capital, the imperial court is sure to refer the matter to Jizhou, which will in turn instruct Yuncheng County to put pressure on my family as a means of forcing my arrest. There's no guarantee my father will be able to live through it. I've been thinking. If I could move him up here, I wouldn't have to worry. Would you brothers permit me?”

“This kind of matter is of great importance to all men,” said Chao Gai. “I wouldn't have you stay here, revelling, while your old father at home is in difficulty. Of course we'll permit you. But our brothers have had several hard days in a row, and we haven't settled things in the fortress yet. Give us another day or two till we've checked our forces, and we'll go together.”

“I could do that, only I'm afraid they'll start pressuring the family very soon. I'd better not delay. Anyhow, I don't want a lot of men. It would be best if I went secretly, alone. With the help of my brother Song Jing I can move my father up here during the night. Man or ghost, no one will know. If I went with a large party we'd only alert the local authorities and make the operation more troublesome.”

“If anything should go wrong, there'd be no one to rescue you.”

“I'd die willingly, for my father's sake.”

Song Jiang insisted on leaving immediately. He wore a broad-brimmed felt hat, carried a cudgel, and hung a dagger at his waist. He went down the mountain, escorted as far as the Shore of Golden Sands by the various chieftains, who then returned.

He was ferried across the river to Zhu Gui's inn, and struck out along the road to Jizhou. He paused only to eat and drink, stopping at night and continuing again at break of day.

When he neared his village it was already evening, too late to go on to the manor. He spent the night at an inn and resumed his journey the following morning. But he reached Song Family Village too early, and he hid himself in a grove. When it was dark he walked up to the manor and knocked on the rear gate. Song Jing opened it. At the sight of Song Jiang he was astonished.

“Brother, why have you come home?” he exclaimed.

“To get father and you.”

“They know here all about what you did in Jiangzhou. The county sends two constables every day to hang around and watch us. We're not allowed to leave. As soon as the documents arrive from Jiangzhou, they're going to arrest father and me and put us in jail until you're captured. There are nearly two hundred soldiers patrolling the neighborhood day and night. Don't delay another minute. Hurry back to Liangshan Marsh and beg the chieftains to rescue us.”

Song Jiang broke into a cold sweat. He didn't dare enter the manor. He turned and hastened off in the direction of the mountain stronghold.

It was night, and the hazy moon shed little light. Song Jiang stuck to the small secluded paths. He had been travelling about a watch when he heard men shouting behind him. He looked back. A *li* or two away he saw the light of torches. “Stand where you are, Song Jiang,” someone yelled.

He hurried on, “I wouldn't listen to Chao Gai,” he thought, “and this is the result. Heaven be merciful and rescue me!”

In the distance were habitations of some sort, and he hastened towards them. The wind blew away the clouds, and in the bright moonlight Song Jiang could see the place clearly. He groaned. It was a desperate situation. For he recognized Circular Road Village. Surrounded by high mountains, with a stream at their foot, it had only this one road. Whether you went left or right within the village, you made a complete circle and returned to your starting point. There was no other way.

Song Jiang turned to retrace his steps. But the men behind had already blocked the road, their torches illuminating it as bright as day.

He plunged into the village and sought refuge. In a grove of trees he discovered an ancient temple. Pushing open the compound gates with both bands, he entered. There, in the moonlight, was a front and a rear building.

He looked them over, but could see no place of concealment. Song Jiang was frantic. Outside, a man said: “He must be in the temple.”

Song Jiang recognized the voice as Zhao Neng's. He had to hide, but where? The shrine, that was it. He pulled aside the curtain, climbed in, rested his club, and curled up behind the idol, not daring to breathe.

He could see torches entering the building, and pecked out. Zhao Neng and Zhao De, leading forty or fifty men, and all carrying torches, were searching the temple.

“I'm in a dead end,” Song Jiang thought. “Spirits of the Nether Region defend me!”

And the spirits answered his prayer. All the men passed by without examining the shrine.

“Heaven be praised,” said Song Jiang.

But then Zhao De advanced towards the shrine with his torch, and Song Jiang thought: “They've got me, for sure.”

The constable raised the curtain with his halberd and shone his torch high and low. Suddenly the torch smoked and a piece of soot fell in Zhao De's eye, blinding him for the moment. He dropped the torch to the floor, stamped on it, and extinguished the light. He went out of the building and spoke to the soldiers in the courtyard.

“The varlet's not in the temple. But there aren't any other paths. Where could he have gone?”

“Probably in that grove in the center of the village. He can't get away, Constable. This is Circular Road Village. There's only one road, in or out. On all sides are trackless forests and high mountains. Block the village exit and he can't escape even if he sprouts wings. As soon as it's daylight, we'll make a thorough search and nab him.”

“Very well,” said the two constables. They led their soldiers out of the temple.

“The spirits are indeed defending me,” thought Song Jiang. “If I get away with my life, I swear I'll repair this temple and rebuild our family chapel. Oh, Spirits of the Nether Region protect me!”

Even before he finished saying this, he heard soldiers outside the temple gate shouting: “Constables, he's here.” Zhao Neng, Zhao De and their men hurried back.

“What rotten luck,” thought Song Jiang. “I'm sure to be caught.”

At the temple entrance Zhao Neng asked: “Where?”

“Look,” said the soldiers. “Dirty hand prints on the gate. He must have pushed it open and gone inside.”

“You're right. Search again—and carefully.” ordered the constable. The men poured into the temple and began probing.

“My fate is against me,” thought Song Jiang. “This time I'm finished!”

The soldiers pried everywhere in the two buildings. About the only things they didn't up-end were the paving bricks. Again their torches brightly illuminated both the edifices.

“He's probably inside the shrine,” Zhao Neng said to Zhao De. “You didn't search thoroughly enough. I'll look myself.”

A soldier took his torch, Zhao Neng pulled the curtain aside, and six or seven men put their heads in. If they hadn't, nothing would have happened. But because they did, a gust of evil wind suddenly rose from within and blew out their torches, plunging the temple into darkness. They couldn't see a thing.

“That's funny,” said Zhao Neng. “How does an evil wind come out of nowhere? The spirit must be in there. Our torches probably annoyed it. Let's go. We'll guard the village exit and search here again when it's daylight.”

“We can't look carefully now, but at least we can poke around with our spears,” said Zhao De.

“True,” said Zhao Neng.

But as the two men moved forward, a huge gale arose from the rear of the building. Sand and gravel came raining down. The whole structure rocked on its foundations. A black cloud swallowed everything, an icy chill crept in. The men's hair stood on end. Zhao Neng recognized the danger.

“Get out, quickly, brother,” he yelled to Zhao De. “The god is angry.”

The whole party fled pell-mell. Several tumbled, a few twisted their legs. But they crawled to their feet and frantically bolted through the temple gate.

“Spare us,” someone inside bleated. Zhao Neng went back into the compound. Two or three soldiers had fallen down the steps and their clothing had snagged in the exposed roots of some big trees. All their struggles couldn't free them. They had cast aside their halberds and were tugging at their clothes and begging for mercy. Song Jiang, still in the shrine, couldn't help laughing.

Zhao Neng extricated the soldiers and led them outside. “That's a very powerful spirit,” the other men said. “You were messing around too much in there, and it sent its little demons after us. We'd better get down to the village entry and make sure that Song Jiang doesn't fly away.”

“Right,” the constables agreed. “If we hold that, we've got him.”

The party marched off to the village entry.

Song Jiang, in the shrine, said to himself: “Although the louts haven't caught me, how am I going to get out of the village?” As he was racking his brain, be heard steps approaching on the rear portico. Song Jiang groaned. “Why didn't I leave here earlier?”

Two boys, clad in green, walked directly to the shrine. “Our Queen invites the Star Lord to speak with her,” they said.

Song Jiang dared not utter a word. Again the boys addressed him.

“Come, Star Lord. The Queen invites you.”

Song Jiang had not the courage to reply. The boys were insistent.

“Star Lord Song, do not delay. The Queen is waiting.”

He heard sounds like the singing of birds. But they were not boys' voices this time. From beneath the idol's throne two girls, also dressed in green, emerged and stood before shrine platform.

Song Jiang was amazed. The girls were Earth Fairies. He heard them say. “Star Lord Song, the Queen awaits.” He pulled open the curtain and came out. Their hair piled in spirals on their heads, the green-clad girls stood bent forward at the waist, each with palms together.

“Fairy maids, whence have you come?” Song Jiang queried.

“Our Queen has instructed that we invite the Star Lord to the palace.”

“You're making a mistake. My name is Song Jiang. I'm not any 'Star Lord'.”

“Of course we're not. Please come along. Star Lord. The Queen is waiting.”

“Which queen? I've never met her. How dare I go?”

“You'll understand when you get there. No need to ask.”

“Where is the Queen?”

“In the palace to the rear.”

The green-clad girls led the way. Song Jiang followed them out of the building. They went through a door in the comer of the compound wall. “This way, Star Lord,” they said.

Song Jiang emerged into the open. The sky had a moon and was full of stars. A fragrant breeze rustled the leaves of the surrounding trees and bamboos.

“I never knew there was a place like this behind the temple,” he thought. “I could have hidden here and saved myself all that fright.”

He walked on, noting two long walls and tall pines on either side, each so thick that two arms couldn't meet around it. The path between was broad and rounded like a turtle's back.

“Who would have thought there'd be such a good road behind that ancient temple,” he mused.

Before they had gone another *li*, he heard the babbling of a brook. Arching over it was a blue stone bridge with vermilion railings. Along the banks were exotic flowers and strange grasses, hoary pines and dense bamboos, green willows and enchanting peach trees. The brook, emerging from a stone fissure, flowed beneath the bridge like tumbling silver, like rolling snow.

They crossed to the other side. Between two rows of grotesque trees was a large star gate with a vermilion lintel. Passing through it, Song Jiang saw a palace ahead. “I was born here in Yuncheng County, but I never heard of this place.” He thought, halting in astonishment.

His green-clad escort urged the “Star Lord” on. They led him through the palace gates. He was confronted by a magnificent courtyard flanked on either side by crimson-pillared esplanades draped with embroidered curtains. Directly ahead was a huge hall, festooned with glowing candles and lanterns.

He followed his guides step by step across the courtyard to a moon terrace. Several boys and girls on the steps of the hall hailed him. They were also dressed in green.

“Star Lord, invited by our Queen, please enter.”

As Song Jiang mounted the steps of the hall, he trembled and his hair stood on end in spite of himself. The flagstones were of carved dragon and phoenix. The green-clad youths parted a curtain of a dais, went in and announced: “Star Lord Song awaits without.”

Song Jiang kowtowed and prostrated himself before the steps of the dais. “I am only a lowly commoner who has never seen the Celestial One. I beg your Heavenly mercy and forgiveness,” he said.

A voice inside invited “Star Lord” Song to be seated. Song Jiang didn't dare lift his head. Four green-clad youths raised him up and helped him to an embroidered pouffe. He sat down awkwardly.

“Roll up the curtain,” a voice commanded.

Four youths rolled up the pearl-beaded curtain and supported it with a gold hook.

“I trust you've been well since last we parted?” said the Queen.

Song Jiang rose and again kowtowed. “A servile mortal such as I dares not gaze on your sacred visage.”

“Since you are here, Star Lord, there is no need for excessive courtesy.”

Only then did Song Jiang venture to lift his head and look. The hall glittered with gold and jade, and was lit by dragon lanterns and phoenix candles. Boys and girls dressed in green on either side held jade wands and pennants and waved large fans. In the center on a bejewelled carved couch sat the Queen. Dressed in filmy golden silks, she held a scepter of white jade. Her eyes were lovely, her countenance divine.

“Please come forward, Star Lord,” she said. She ordered that wine be served.

Two green-clad girls poured wine into a jade cup from an intricately carved pitcher of gold. The first girl handed the cup to Song Jiang. He rose, unable to refuse, and accepted it. Facing the Queen, he knelt and drank. The

fragrant liquor drifted to his brain like ambrosia, seeped into his heart like dew.

Another girl offered him a platter of fairy dates. Trembling lest he commit some gaucherie, he picked up a date with the tips of his fingers, ate it, and concealed the pit in his hand. Again the green-clad girl poured wine, and again he downed it at one go. The Queen signalled to refill his cup. This was done, and he drank once more.

A fairy maid offered the dates. He ate another two. In all, he imbibed three cups of fairy wine and consumed three fairy dates. He was feeling a little drunk and feared that he might behave improperly.

“I have no capacity for wine,” he said. “I hope the Queen will excuse me from taking more.”

“Granted,” said the Queen, “since the Star Lord is not a drinker. Bring the Three Heavenly Books and present them to the Star Lord.”

A youth went behind a screen and brought out a jade tray on which were Three Heavenly Books wrapped in gold silk and proffered them to Song Jiang. The packet was five inches long, three inches wide, and three inches thick. Song Jiang was afraid to open it. He kowtowed, accepted the packet reverently, and put it in his sleeve.

“Star Lord,” said the Queen, “we have given you Three Heavenly Books. You must act according to Heaven's behest and show complete loyalty to the emperor. When you become an official, you must defend the country and bring peace to the people. Expel wickedness and pursue justice. Never forget this.”

Song Jiang promised, and again kowtowed. The Queen continued:

“Since your heart is not yet pure nor your duties done, the Jade Emperor, as a punishment, has banished you to earth temporarily. Soon you will return to Heaven's Purple Palace, so in no way relax your efforts. If because of new sins you are condemned to Hell I shall not be able to save you. Familiarize yourself thoroughly with these three books. You may show

them to the Occult Star, but to no other. After you have completed your mission, burn them. They are not to be left on earth. Remember all I have said. Today, I am a divinity and you a mortal. We cannot remain together. You must go back now, quickly."

The Queen instructed her fairies to send him on his way. "We shall meet again in fairyland's towers of gold and jade," she said.

Song Jiang thanked her, and followed some green-clad girls out of the hall and through the Star Gate. The fairy maids saw him as far as the stone bridge.

"You had a fright not long ago and would have been captured if our Queen hadn't intervened," they said. "Tomorrow, when it is light, you will escape. Oh, look, Star Lord. Two dragons are playing in the water."

Song Jiang leaned over the rail and gazed. Two of the girls gave him a sudden push. Song Jiang let out a yell, and landed in the shrine. He had been dreaming.

He crawled to his feet and looked out. The moon was at its zenith. Song Jiang estimated it to be around the third watch. In his hand he found three date pits. And in his sleeve was the silk-wrapped packet. He opened it up. Sure enough, there were the Three Heavenly Books. He could still taste the fragrant wine.

"A strange dream," he mused. "It seemed so real. Yet if it was only a dream, what are these Heavenly Books doing in my sleeve, why can I still taste the wine, what are these date pits doing in my hand? And how can I remember every word? If it wasn't a dream, why have I fallen into this shrine? The answer is obvious. The spirit here is extremely potent, and manifests itself very powerfully. Which one is it, I wonder?"

He raised the curtain to let some light in. On a throne carved with nine dragons sat a beautiful female figure, exactly the same as the Queen.

"She called me 'Star Lord'," he said to himself. "Evidently I was no ordinary person in my previous life. These Three Heavenly Books will

certainly be useful, and I will not forget the divine instructions. Those green-clad fairy maids said: 'Tomorrow, when it is light, you will escape.' The sky is already turning light. I'm getting out of here."

He groped around until he found his cudgel, brushed the dust off his clothes and cautiously emerged from the building. He walked along the left esplanade and went out of the temple. He looked up at the signboard over the gateway. In letters of gold, it read: "Temple of the Mystic Queen."

Song Jiang placed his fingers on his forehead and bowed his thanks. "How lucky. So it was the Mystic Queen of Ninth Heaven who gave me those Heavenly Books! And she's saved my life, as well. If only I can see that divine face again, I surely will repair this temple and add more halls. I prostrate myself, wise and beneficent Queen, and beg your protection."

He advanced stealthily towards the village entry. He hadn't gone very far when he heard wild shouts in the distance. "Trouble again," he thought, and halted. "I can't get out of the village, and if they see me, they'll take me. I'd better hide behind those trees on the side of the road."

No sooner had he slipped into his place of shelter than several soldiers, knives and lances in hand, ran frantically in his direction, panting and stumbling. "Mystic Spirit, save us," they cried.

"Very peculiar," thought Song Jiang. "They're supposed to be waiting to nab me at the village entry. What are they doing here?"

A moment later Zhao Neng tore down the road. "Spirit," he bawled, "Spirit protect me!"

"Why is that oaf in such a tizzy?" Song Jiang wondered.

Then he saw their pursuer. He was a huge fellow, stripped to the waist and bulging with fantastic muscles. In his hands were two great battle-axes.

"Halt, you friggin pricks," the man roared.

As he drew nearer, Song Jiang recognized him. It was none other than Li Kui the Black Whirlwind.

“This must be a dream,” said Song Jiang. He dared not emerge.

In front of the temple Zhao Neng tripped over the exposed root of a pine tree and fell to the ground. Li Kui caught up, put a foot on his back and raised a big ax. Two other bold fellows also raced up, pushing their broad-brimmed felt hats back onto their shoulders. Each held a halberd. The first was Ou Peng, the second Tao Zongwang. Li Kui, afraid that they would compete with each other for the honor of capturing the knave at the expense of fraternal loyalty, swung his ax and cleaved Zhao Neng from head to chest. Then he chased after the fleeing soldiers, killing left and right, as they tan in all directions.

Afraid to come out; Song Jiang watched as three more gallants appeared. The first was Liu Tang the Red-Haired Demon, the second was Shi Yong the General, the third was Hell's Summoner LiLi. The six men conferred.

“We've killed all those rogues,” they said, “but can't find brother. A fine state of affairs!”

“There's a man standing behind that pine,” cried Shi Yong.

Only then did Song Jiang step forward. “Thank you, brothers, for rescuing me again,” he said. “How can I ever repay you?”

The six were overjoyed. “Brother is here,” they exclaimed. “Leader Chao Gai must be told at once.”

Shi Yong and LiLi hurried off to report.

“How did you know where I was?” Song Jiang asked Liu Tang.

“When you left the mountain Chao Gai and Wu Yong were uneasy. They told Superintendent Dai to go down and find out what happened to you. But Chao Gai still was worried. He set out with me and these companions as reinforcements. He was afraid you'd get into trouble. On the road we met

Dai. 'Two thieving donkeys are after brother to arrest him,' he told us. Chao Gai was very angry. He instructed Dai to go back to the stronghold and say that only Wu Yong, Gongsun Sheng, and a few others were to remain and hold the fort. All the rest were to come out and search for you.

“Then we heard someone say: 'Song Jiang has been run to ground in Circular Road Village.' We slaughtered all the scoundrels patrolling the entry, except for the few who fled into the village. Brother Li Kui gave chase, and we followed. We never thought we'd find you here.”

Before he had finished speaking, the others arrived. When all had assembled, Song Jiang thanked them, every one.

“I urged you not to go down the mountain alone, brother, but you wouldn't listen,” said Chao Gai. “You nearly lost your life.”

“My concern about my father gave me no rest. I had to go and fetch him.”

“This will please you, then. I sent Dai Zong with a few others after your father and brother. They've already arrived at the stronghold.”

Song Jiang was delighted. He kowtowed to Chao Gai. “For such beneficence, brother, I would die willingly.”

All mounted horses and left the village. Song Jiang touched his fingers to his forehead, gazed up at the sky and thanked the Mystic Queen for her protection. He vowed that one day he would prove his gratitude.

The column proceeded back towards Liangshan Marsh. Wu Yong and the other chieftains holding the fortress were at the Shore of Golden Sands to greet them. They went together to Fraternity Hall.

“Where is my father?” Song Jiang asked eagerly.

Chao Gai sent a man to fetch Squire Song. Not long after, the old man arrived, riding in a sedan-chair which his son Song Qing the Iron Fan was helping carry. Everyone assisted him down and escorted him into the hall.

Song Jiang was overjoyed. Smiling broadly, he kowtowed. “Forgive your unfilial son for causing you such alarm.”

“Those two wretched constables sent men. They were waiting only for the documents to arrive from Jiangzhou so that they could bring your brother and me into court. When I heard that you were at the rear gate, there were eight or nine soldiers in the thatch-roofed hall up front. Then they disappeared, but we didn't know what drove them away. Finally, at the third watch, over two hundred men opened the manor gates, put me in a sedan-chair, and told your brother to load up our valuables and set fire to the manor. I had no chance to ask why, and they brought me here.”

“We owe it all to these brothers that we are together again.”

Song Jiang told Song Qing to kowtow and thank the chieftains. Chao Gai and the leaders also kowtowed to Squire Song. Cows and horses were slaughtered and a feast was laid to celebrate the reunion of Squire Song and his sons. The whole day was spent in rejoicing. The next day they feasted again, and chieftains, large and small, joined in the merrymaking.

On the third day Chao Gai once more gave a banquet of celebration. Gongsun Sheng was suddenly reminded of his old mother in Jizhou. It was a long time since he'd seen her, and he wondered how she was. During the drinking, he rose and addressed the chieftains.

“I am deeply grateful for the kindness which you have always shown me. Flesh and blood couldn't be treated better,” he said. “I have been happy since I followed our leader Chao Gai here up this mountain. But I have never once gone home to see my old mother. And I imagine my old Taoist teacher also misses me. I wish you would grant me a leave of four or five months to visit them. It would please me mightily, and then I wouldn't have to worry about my old mother.”

“I recall your saying that your mother has no one to look after her in your home in the north,” replied Chao Gai. “Since you ask, we can't refuse, though we hate to part. When you're ready, we'll see you off.”

Gongsun thanked him. All drank freely that day, and in the evening retired to their quarters to rest. The following morning a farewell feast was given for Gongsun Sheng.

He resumed his garb of a wandering Taoist priest, tied one pouch at his side, another over his middle, hung a pair of swords across his back, a coir hat over his shoulders, and held a tortoise shell fan in his hand. The chieftains went with him down the mountain. At the pass a feast was laid and they drank in farewell.

“We cannot keep you, sir priest,” said Chao Gai, “Don't disappoint us. Though we didn't want to let you go, we couldn't very well refuse since it's a question of your mother. But we expect you back in a hundred days or so. Don't break your word.”

“How could I? You leaders have been so considerate of me for so long. I'll go home, visit my Taoist teacher, see to it that my mother is well provided for, and return.”

“Why don't you take a few men with you?” asked Song Jiang. “They could help bring your old mother back. Then you could look after her all the time.”

“My mother has always liked peace and quiet. She can't stand excitement. That's why I don't dare bring her to this place. We've got a few fields and some slope land. She can manage. I only want to make sure that she's all right, then I'll rejoin you.”

“In that case, so be it. We'll be looking forward to your early return,” said Song Jiang.

Chao Gai offered Gongsun gold and silver on a platter for his journey.

“I don't need all that,” he said. “Just enough for expenses.”

But Chao Gai forced him to take half. Gongsun put the money in his side pouch, placed his palms together and bid the chieftains farewell. After

crossing from the Shore of Golden Sands, he set out in the direction of Jizhou.

As the chieftains prepared to go back up the mountain they were startled to see Li Kui burst into tears.

“What's the trouble, brother?” Song Jiang hastily inquired.

“A fine life,” bawled Black Whirlwind. “This one goes to fetch his pa, that one goes to see his ma. Iron Ox didn't pop out of some friggin hole in the ground!”

“What is it that you want?”

“My old mother is home alone. My older brother is a hired hand. How can he support her? I want to bring her here so she can have a few years of happiness.”

“You're absolutely right,” said Chao Gai. “We'll send a few men with you to escort her back. An excellent idea.”

“It can't be done,” Song Jiang interjected. “Brother Li is too irascible. If he goes home, he's sure to get into trouble. Even if we send men with him, that won't be any good either. He's too hot-tempered. He'd quarrel with them on the road. Besides, he's killed a lot of people in Jiangzhou. Everybody there knows Black Whirlwind. Notices calling for his arrest must have been circulated. Of course his native village has been alerted. He's so fierce-looking, he sticks out like a sore thumb. And his home's quite far away. If anything should go wrong, we might not get the news. Better wait till things quiet down, brother Li. There will still be time.”

“You're not fair, brother,” Li Kui cried impatiently, “You fetched your father here and he's happy. Should my mother stay in her village and suffer? Do you want Iron Ox's belly to burst with rage?”

“Calm yourself, brother. We'll let you go, but on three conditions.”

“What are they?”

Song Jiang told him, counting the conditions off on his fingers.

And as a result Li Kui, with his earth-rocking, heaven-shaking hands, fought mountain-climbing, chasm-leaping tigers.

What were the three conditions Song Jiang put to Li Kui? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 43
The False Li Kui Robs Lone Travellers on the Road
Black Whirlwind Kills Four Tigers on Yiling Mountain

“You're going to Yishui County in Yizhou Prefecture to get your mother. The first condition is that you don't drink on the way,” said Song Jiang. “You've got such a rotten temper no one dares go with you. So the second condition is that you go alone and fetch her quietly. The third condition is that you leave your two battle-axes here. Be careful during the journey. Go soon and return quickly.”

“Nothing hard about those conditions. Don't worry, brother. I'll depart today and I won't tarry at home.”

Li Kui tied up some belongings, hung a dagger at his waist, and took a halberd, and one large and four or five small silver ingots. He drank a few cups of wine and respectfully bid the leaders farewell, then went down the mountain and crossed at the Shore of Golden Sands.

Chao Gai and Song Jiang, after seeing him off, returned to Fraternity Hall and took their seats. Song Jiang was uneasy in his mind.

“Brother Li Kui is bound to get into a scrape,” he said. “Is there anyone among us who comes from his home area? Someone who could go there and keep tabs on him?”

“Zhu Gui is an Yihui County man,” said Du Qian. “They're from the same township.”

“I forgot about that,” said Song Jiang. “Li Kui hailed him as a neighbor when they met at White Dragon Temple.”

Song Jiang sent for Zhu Gui. A young brigand flew down the mountain to the inn and fetched him.

“Brother Li Kui has gone home to get his mother,” Song Jiang said. “Because he's nasty when drunk, we didn't ask anyone to go along. But we're afraid he'll get into trouble. I hear you're from the same parts. I wish you'd go and keep an eye on him.”

“Yes, I'm from Yishui. My brother Zhu Fu has a tavern outside the west gate of the county town. Li Kui is from a hamlet called Dongdian East, which is part of the village of Baizhang. He has a brother named Li Da, a hired hand. Li Kui has always been fierce. He had to leave because he killed a man. He's been knocking about ever since and has never returned home. I can go easy enough, but I've no one to look after the inn. I haven't been back in a long time either. I'll be glad to see my brother again.”

“No problem about the inn. I'll ask Hou Jian and Shi Yong to take charge while you're gone.”

Zhu Gui bid the leaders farewell, went down the mountain, gathered some belongings, turned the inn over to Shi Yong and Hou Jian, and set out for Yizhou.

Song Jiang dined and drank with Chao Gai every day in the fortress, and studied the Heavenly Books with Wu Yong the Occult Star. Of that we'll say no more.

Li Kui, on leaving Liangshan Marsh, travelled alone and reached the border of Yishui County. As promised, he did no drinking, and kept out of trouble. There's nothing to relate on that. Outside the west gate of the county town he saw people crowded around a proclamation board. He pushed among them and listened to a man who was reading aloud:

“... The first is main culprit Song Jiang, of Yuncheng County. The second is accomplice Dai Zong, former superintendent of the two Jiangzhou prisons. The third is accomplice Li Kui, of Yishui County, Yizhou Prefecture...”

Li Kui seethed inwardly, his control melting away. A man hastened up from behind and locked him a restraining embrace.

“Brother Zhang,” cried the man. “What are you doing here?”

Black Whirlwind turned his head and looked. It was Zhu Gui the Dry-Land Crocodile.

“What about you?” Li Kui demanded.

“Come with me and I'll tell you.”

The two went to a nearby tavern outside the west gate of the town and sat down in a quiet room in the rear. Zhu Gui pointed his finger at Black Whirlwind.

“You're very rash. That proclamation offers a reward of ten thousand strings of cash for Song Jiang, five thousand for Dai Zong and three thousand for Li Kui. And you stand there looking at it! Suppose some sharp-eyed, quick-handed fellow hauled you off to the authorities? What would you do then? Because brother Song Jiang was afraid you'd quarrel, he didn't send anyone along. But he was also worried you'd get into trouble. So he ordered me to catch up and keep an eye on you. I left the stronghold a day later than you did but got here a day ahead. Where have you been all this time?”

“He told me not to drink any wine. That's why I couldn't walk very fast. How do you know this tavern? Do you live around here? Where is your house?”

“The tavern belongs to my brother Zhu Fu. I used to live in these parts. I was a travelling merchant. But I went broke and became a bandit in Liangshan Marsh. This is the first time I've been home.”

Zhu Gui introduced his brother to Li Kui, and the tavern keeper treated them to wine.

“Brother Song Jiang instructed me not to drink. But now I've reached my home parts. If I drink a bowl or two, what's the friggin difference?”

Zhu Gui didn't venture to stop him, and they drank until the fourth watch. Food was then served, and Li Kui ate. Around the fifth watch, when the

moon and the stars were fading and dawn was brightening the sky, he started for the village.

“Don't take the small path,” Zhu Gui advised. “Follow the main road east from the big oak tree, straight to Baizhang. That will bring you into Dongdian East. Fetch your mother out and return quickly to the mountain stronghold.”

“It's nearer if I go by the path. Who's got the patience to take the big road?”

“There are tigers along that path, and robbers who'll steal your bundle.”

“They don't worry me.” Li Kui put on his broad-brimmed felt hat, picked up his halberd, hung on his dagger, bid farewell to Zhu Gui and his brother, and headed for the village of Baizhang.

By the time he travelled a dozen *li* or so, the sky had gradually turned light. A white rabbit popped out of the dew-drenched grass and scampered before him. Li Kui gave chase. “That little animal has guided me a stage forward,” he said, laughing.

Ahead was a grove of about fifty large trees. Autumn had just begun, and their leaves were a brilliant red. When Li Kui reached the edge of the grove a big fellow suddenly emerged.

“Shell out money for a safe passage, if you know what's good for you,” the man shouted. “Otherwise I'll take your bundle.”

Li Kui looked him over. His head was bound in a red silk kerchief, and he wore a padded gown of crude cloth. He grasped a battle-ax in each hand. A black substance was smeared all over his face.

“Who the hell are you, daring to play the robber in this place?” Li Kui roared.

“When you hear my name you'll tremble. I'm Black Whirlwind! Leave your money and your bundle and I'll spare your life and let you pass.”

Li Kui laughed. “No such friggin thing. Who are you, oaf? Where are you from? How dare you use my name and play the fool here?”

He charged, halberd in hand. The man realized he had met his match and turned to flee. Li Kui stabbed him in the thigh, felling him to the ground, and planted a foot on his chest.

“Recognize me?”

“Master, spare your servant's life!”

“I am Li Kui the Black Whirlwind, a man among bold men. You've sullied my name, you lout!”

“My family name is also Li, but of course I'm not Black Whirlwind. You're so famous in the gallant fraternity, the very mention of your name frightens demons. So I borrowed it when I became a robber here. I stop only persons travelling alone. When they hear the words 'Black Whirlwind', they drop their luggage and run. I've made some tidy profits that way, but actually I've never harmed anybody. My real name is Li Gui, and I live in that village yonder.”

“You've got a friggin nerve, robbing and ruining my reputation. You've even copied my two axes. Well, I'll give you a taste of one of them.” Li Kui raised the weapon.

“If you kill me, master, you'll be destroying two,” Li Gui hastily cried.

Li Kui stayed his hand. “What do you mean by that?”

“I didn't want to become a robber. But I've a ninety-year-old mother at home, with no one to support her. So I've been using your renowned name to scare lone travellers and snatch their bundles. That's how I've been able to take care of her. I never really injured anybody. If you kill me, my old mother will surely starve to death!”

Although Li Kui was a fiend who killed without batting an eye, these words gave him pause. “I've come home specially to fetch my mother,” he

thought. “If I kill a man who's supporting his own mother, Heaven and Earth will not forgive me.” And he said: “All right, knave, you can live.” He let him up.

Still holding his axes, Li Gui dropped to his knees and kowtowed.

“Just remember that only I am the true Black Whirlwind,” Li Kui cautioned him. “You're not to spoil my name from now on.”

“Today my life has been spared. I'm going home and changing my profession. I'll never again use master's name here to rob.”

“You're a filial son. Here are ten ounces of silver to give you a start in your new business.”

Li Kui gave him a ten-ounce silver ingot. The man thanked him and departed. Black Whirlwind laughed.

“He fell right into my hands. Since he's a filial son, he'll have to change his occupation. If I killed him, Heaven and Earth would have been angry. I had to let him go.”

With his halberd, he trudged up the mountain path. By mid-morning he was hungry and thirsty. All around were small trails, but there wasn't a tavern or restaurant in sight.

Then, in the hollow ahead, he saw a number of thatched cottages. As he hurried towards one of them, he observed a woman coming out from the rear. A wild flower was tucked into the bun of hair in the back of her head, and her face was rouged and powdered. Li Kui rested the butt of his halberd.

“Sister-in-law, I'm a traveller who's passing by. I'm hungry, but I can't find a tavern. If I pay you a string of cash will you give me food and wine?”

The woman saw how tough he looked, and she dared not refuse. “We haven't any wine,” she said, “but I can cook some rice for you.”

“That will do. Don't hold back. I'm friggin hungry.”

“One measure will be plenty, I suppose?”

“Better make it three.”

The woman lit the fire in the kitchen, washed the rice in the stream, and set it on to cook.

Li Kui went to the slope behind the house to relieve himself. He saw a man approaching stealthily around a bend of the mountain. Li Kui returned to the rear of the house. The woman, who was about to go up the slope to pick some vegetables, opened the rear door and saw the man.

“Brother,” she called, “how did you hurt your leg?”

“I had a close call. One slip and you'd never have seen me again! Of all the friggin luck! I've been waiting for a lone traveller for half a month, but business has been bad. Then today one came along, and who do you think it was? The real Black Whirlwind! I had to run into that donkey's prick! Of course I was no match for him. He brought me down with one in the thigh from his halberd and wanted to kill me. I put on an act and cried: 'If you kill me you'll be destroying two.' He asked me what I meant, and I said: 'I have a ninety-year-old mother, with no one to support her. She'll starve to death, for sure.' That donkey's prick believed me. Not only did he spare my life, he gave me silver to start a new business and look after my mother. I was afraid he'd get wise and come after me, so I left the grove, found a place for a quiet nap, and came back around the mountain.”

“Keep your voice down,” said the woman. “A big swarthy fellow arrived just now and asked me to cook him some rice. I'll bet he's the one. He's sitting outside the front door. Take a look at him. If it's him, find me some drug and I'll put it in the vegetables. After he passes out, you and I will dispose of him. We'll take his gold and silver and move to the county town and go into business. That will be better than robbing travellers on the road.”

Li Kui, who had heard every word, said to himself: “The rogue! I gave him silver and spared his life, and now he wants to kill me! That's unforgivable!”

He came around to the back door as Li Gui was about to leave and grabbed him by the hair. The woman ran towards the front door. Li Kui threw his captive to the ground, pulled out his knife and cut his head off. He hurried round to the front door, dagger in hand, seeking the woman. But she had disappeared. He went back and searched the house. Beneath some old clothes in two bamboo hampers he found a few pieces of silver and a number of ornamental hairpins and earrings. These he appropriated, and from the body of Li Gui retrieved the silver ingot he had given, and wrapped the loot in his bundle.

The three measures of rice on the stove were steaming hot, but he had no vegetables to go with them. He scooped the rice into a bowl and ate. Suddenly, he grinned. “What a fool I am. There's good meat right before me. Why shouldn't I eat it?”

He whipped out his dagger and cut two pieces of flesh from Li Gui's leg. After washing them in the stream, he cooked them over burning kindling he took from the stove, roasting and eating at the same time. When he was full, he dragged Li Gui's body into the house and set the place on fire. Halberd in hand, he continued along the mountain path.

The sun was already low on the western horizon by the time he reached the hamlet of Dongdian East. He went directly to his home, pushed open the door and entered.

“Who's there?” his mother called. Li Kui saw that she was blind. She was sitting on the bed, murmuring the name of Buddha.

“It's Iron Ox, ma. I've come back.”

“You've been gone so long, son! Where have you been all these years? Your brother's working as a hired hand. He scarcely gets enough to feed himself. He can't really take care of me. I thought of you often, and wept till my tears ran dry. That's why I've become blind. What have you been doing with yourself?”

Li Kui thought: “If I tell her I'm a brigand in Liangshan Marsh, ma won't be willing to go with me. I'd better make up a story.” Aloud, he said: “Your

Iron Ox is now an official. I've come to fetch you."

"That's fine, son. How are you going to take me?"

"I'll carry you on my back to the road, and there we'll find a cart to travel in."

"Wait till your elder brother gets home. Talk it over with him, first."

"What for? We'll just go."

They were about to depart when Li Da, the brother, returned, with a jug of rice. Li Kui kowtowed before him.

"Brother, it's been years."

"Why have you come back, you scoundrel? To get us involved again?"

"Iron Ox is an official," the mother said. "He's come to take me with him."

"Don't believe his bullshit, ma. When he killed a man, I was the one who had to wear fetters and manacles and suffer all kinds of torments. Lately, I heard that, in league with the bandits in Liangshan Marsh, he snatched criminals from an execution ground, ran riot in Jiangzhou, and that he's now a member of the Liangshan gang. A few days ago Jiangzhou notified our local authorities to be on the alert and arrest him. They wanted to take me in first as surety, but my master spoke to the officials on my behalf. 'Li Kui left more than ten years ago and nobody knows where he's gone', he said. 'He's never returned. It must be someone with the same name who pretends he comes from these parts.' And my master handed out a few bribes. Otherwise I would have to produce the culprit within a fixed time on pain of being beaten. There's a proclamation offering three thousand strings of cash for his capture."

Li Da turned on Iron Ox. "Why haven't you died, instead of coming home and telling a lot of lies!"

"Don't get excited, brother. We'll go to the mountain stronghold together and be happy. It's not a bad life."

The furious Li Da longed to strike him, but he knew he was no match for his younger brother. He thumped the jug down on the floor and went out.

“He's going to report this and bring men to seize me,” thought Li Kui. “I've got to get out of here, fast. My brother has never in his life seen a big ingot of silver. I'll leave this fifty ounce piece for him on the bed. When he comes back and finds it he won't pursue me.”

He took the big ingot from his waist pouch and placed it on the bed. “Ma,” he said, “I'll carry you away on my back and that will be the end of it.”

“Where are we going?”

“Don't ask me. I promise you we'll be happy. Toting you will be easy enough.”

He hoisted his mother onto his back, picked up his halberd, left the house and strode forth along a secluded path.

Li Da hastened to his landlord master and reported, then, with a dozen or so vassals, rushed back to the house. His mother was gone. On the bed was a big silver ingot.

“He's left me this ingot, but where has he gone into hiding with our mother?” thought Li Da. “He must have other men from Liangshan Marsh with him. If I catch up they'll surely kill me. He's probably carrying ma to their mountain stronghold to enjoy a good life.”

Since there was no sign of Li Kui, the vassals didn't know what to do.

“Iron Ox has carried my mother off, but who can say which path he's taken?” said Li Da. “There are so many of them, we'd never be able to find him.”

Obviously, Li Da was perplexed. The vassals hung around for a while, then went home. Of that we'll say no more.

Li Kui, his mother on his back, hurried along a small path towards the mountains. Night had fallen when they reached the foot of a slope. His

mother, being blind, couldn't tell whether it was morning or evening. Li Kui knew the height ahead was called Yiling Mountain. Only on the other side was there human habitation. He trudged upward with her in the starlight.

“Son,” she said, “could you ask someone for some water?”

“After we cross the ridge, ma, we'll find a house where we can rest and eat.”

“I had only dry rice at noon. I'm very thirsty.”

“My throat is burning too. After I've carried you to the top, I'll look for water.”

“Save me, son. I'm dying of thirst.”

“And I'm pretty near exhausted.”

Li Kui plodded to the summit. He set the old woman down on a large rock beside a pine tree and stabbed the blade of his halberd into the ground nearby.

“Be patient, ma. I'll fetch you some water.”

Li Kui could hear the gurgling of a brook, and went in the direction of the sound. He found it, finally, after crossing two or three foothills. He drank several mouthfuls.

“How can I bring this water to my mother?” he pondered. He stood up and gazed around. High on a ridge above he saw a temple. “Good,” he thought. Grasping hanging vines and shrubs he clambered up. He walked to the temple, pushed open the courtyard gate and entered. It was a private chapel dedicated to the Great Sage of Sizhou. Before it was a large stone incense burner.

Li Kui tugged at the vessel, but it and its base were carved from a single block. He couldn't budge it. Anger boiled within him. He lifted it up, base and all, and clonked it down on the stone step, knocking the urn free. This he took to the stream, scrubbed it with bunches of grass and washed it

clean. He then filled it half with water and, holding it in both hands, retraced his path to the summit.

His mother was not on the big rock beside the pine, though the halberd was still nearby. He called to her to come and drink. There was no sign of the old lady anywhere. He shouted a few more times, without response.

Li Kui became alarmed. He cast aside the incense vessel and peered carefully around. His mother had vanished.

Then, on the grass about thirty paces away, he saw the bloodstains, and he began to tremble. He followed the trail of blood to a large cave. Two tiger cubs outside were licking a human leg. Li Kui couldn't stop shivering.

“I came all the way from Liangshan Marsh to fetch my old mother,” he thought. “Did I carry her here on my back, in spite of trials and tribulations, just for you to eat? That leg, which some friggin tiger has dragged here, must be my mother's!”

Li Kui was consumed with fury. His trembling ceased, his reddish whiskers bristled. He prodded the two cubs with his halberd till they snarled, bared their claws and attacked. He stabbed one to death. The other ran into the cave. Li Kui chased it inside and killed it. Crouching in the cave, he looked out. A savage tigress was returning to her lair.

“You are the beast who ate my mother!” he thought. He lay down his halberd and pulled out his dagger.

The tigress sat down at the mouth of the cave, her hindquarters and swishing tail inside the entry. Li Kui examined her carefully. With all his might he drove his dagger up her bunghole with such force that blade and hilt penetrated her stomach. With a roar the tigress leaped over a chasm, the knife still in her. Li Kui snatched up his halberd and gave chase. The tigress, in great pain, charged down the cliff.

Li Kui was about to follow when a sudden gale arising among the trees brought down a shower of leaves and branches, “Clouds herald dragons, gales foretell tigers,” as the old saying goes. From the place where the wind

blew, a roaring tiger leaped out. It had upward-slanting eyes and a white forehead, and it charged directly at Li Kui.

Coolly, Black Whirlwind thrust his halberd into the neck of the hurtling beast. It halted abruptly, for the blade had pierced its windpipe, staggered back six or seven paces, then fell like a collapsing mountain and expired on the bluff. Li Kui went into the den to see whether there were more tigers, but there was no sign of any. Very weary, he made his way to the private chapel and slept till daylight.

He rose early and collected his mother's leg and whatever other bones remained, wrapped them in his robe and buried them in a grave he dug behind the chapel. He wept bitterly. Finally, hunger and thirst impelled him to gather his bundle, take up his halberd, and proceed slowly across the ridge.

He met half a dozen hunters armed with bows and arrows. When they saw him coming down the slope covered with blood, they were startled.

“Are you a mountain spirit, or what, sir traveller?” they demanded. “How dare you cross the ridge all alone?”

“Yishui County is offering three thousand strings of cash for me,” Li Kui thought. “I can't tell them who I really am.” Aloud, he said: “I'm a traveller. I was crossing the ridge with my mother last night and she got thirsty. While I was down fetching her water, a tiger dragged her off and ate her. I followed the trail to the den and killed first two cubs, then two big beasts. I slept in the chapel to the Great Sage of Sizhou until daybreak. I've just come from there.”

“You, one man, killed four tigers? We don't believe you. Even ancient heroes like Li Cunxiao and Zi Lu only killed one each. You might have done in the two cubs, but two full-grown tigers—impossible! We've been beaten time and again for failing to eliminate those two beasts. Ever since they made their lair on Yishan Mountain three or four months ago, no one has dared cross the ridge. We don't believe it. You must be kidding.”

“I'm not from around here. Why should I kid you? Come up and see for yourself. And bring some men to carry the tigers down.”

“We'll be very grateful, if it's true. A wonderful thing!” The hunters whistled shrilly. In a few minutes forty or fifty men, armed with barbed spears and cudgels, were following Li Kui up the trail. It was broad daylight by the time they reached the summit. Sure enough, there were two dead cubs at the cave, one outside and one in. The body of a female tiger lay at the foot of the cliff. A dead male tiger was sprawled before the chapel to the Great Sage of Sizhou.

Overjoyed, the hunters tied the legs of the beasts together and carried them down, slung on poles. They requested Li Kui to claim the reward, and sent a man ahead to inform the village head and the gentry. All came out to greet Black Whirlwind and the tigers were brought to the manor of Squire Cao. A retired petty official, Cao was a nasty, unscrupulous type. Through various crooked deals he had recently become very rich.

Cao invited Li Kui to be seated in his thatch-roofed hall, and asked how he killed the tigers. Li Kui repeated his recital. Everyone listened, open-mouthed.

“What is your name, warrior?” Cao asked.

“My family name is Zhang. I have no given name. I'm called Zhang the Brave.”

“You're indeed worthy of that title. Otherwise, how could you have killed four tigers?” Cao ordered a feast in honor of his guest. Of that we'll say no more.

When word spread that four tigers had been killed on Yiling Mountain and carried to the manor of Squire Cao, excitement in the village ran high. Everyone, men and women, young and old, flocked to see the dead beasts, and to peer at the hero Squire Cao was entertaining in his hall.

Among the spectators was Li Gui's wife. She had fled to this village of Yiling where her parents lived. Going to view the tigers, she recognized Li

Kui. She rushed home and told her parents.

“That big swarthy fellow who killed the tigers is the man who murdered my husband and burned down our house. He's known as Black Whirlwind of Liangshan Marsh.”

The parents immediately informed the village head. “If he's Black Whirlwind,” the official thought, “then he's Li Kui, who killed a man in Baizhang Village on the other side of the mountain and ran away to Jiangzhou. He made trouble there too, and our county has been directed to arrest him on sight. A reward of three thousand strings of cash is offered for his capture. And here he is!”

The village head quietly sent a man for Squire Cao. On the excuse that he wanted to change his clothes, Cao left the hall and hastened to the home of the village head.

“That tiger killer is none other than Li Kui the Black Whirlwind, from Baizhang on the other side of the mountain. There's a notice out for his arrest.”

“Better check carefully,” said Cao. “If he's not, you'll be making a big mistake. If he is, it's no problem. We can take him easily enough. But if he's not the man there'll be trouble.”

“Li Gui's wife recognized him. He stopped at their house to eat, and killed Li Gui.”

“In that case, we'll ply him with wine and ask him whether he wants to go to the county town to claim the reward for the tigers, or whether he'll take some recompense here in the village. If he's unwilling to go to the county office, then we know he's Black Whirlwind. We'll keep toasting him in relays till he's drunk. Then we'll tie him up, inform the county authorities and have them send a constable to come and get him. We can't go wrong.”

“Very good,” the others agreed.

Squire Cao returned home to dupe Li Kui. As he poured more wine, he said: “Forgive me for having left you. Please remove the pouches around your waist, rest your halberd and make yourself comfortable.”

“Fine,” said Li Kui. “My dagger is in the belly of the tigress. I've only the sheath here. When you cut her open, I'd like it back.”

“Don't give it a thought. I've plenty of good blades. You must let me present you with one.”

Li Kui handed his dagger sheath and pouches to vassals to keep for him, and leaned his halberd against the wall. Squire Cao ordered a large platter of meat and a big pot of wine. The gentry, the village head and the hunters toasted Li Kui with large bowls and flagons.

“Will you be going to the authorities to claim the reward for the tigers, or would you prefer to receive some recompense here?” asked the squire.

“I'm a traveller, passing through, and I don't have much time. I happened to have killed a few tigers. There's no need to claim any county reward. If you have a little money here, that will do. If you don't, I'll go on without it.”

“We couldn't treat you so shabbily. Our Yiling Village will collect a fund for you. We'll send the tigers to the county ourselves.”

“I'd like a cotton robe to exchange for these clothes.”

“Of course,” said Cao. Li Kui was given a black robe to replace his blood-stained clothing.

Drums pounded and flutes warbled at the door, as everyone congratulated Li Kui with cold wine and hot. He didn't know he was being tricked, and he drank freely, completely forgetting Song Jiang's injunction. In less than two watches, he was so drunk he couldn't stand.

He was helped to a room in the rear of the hall and laid out on a bench. They tied him securely to it with two ropes. Cao told the village head to

rush men to report to the county authorities, and take Li Gui's wife with them to file a formal accusation.

The entire Yishui County office was thrown into a turmoil on hearing the news. The astonished magistrate hastily summoned court.

“Where is Black Whirlwind being detained?” he queried. “That man's a rebel. He mustn't get away.”

“He's tied up in Squire Cao's manor,” the complainant arid hunters replied. “But no one can restrain him for long. We haven't tried to bring him here because we're afraid he'd escape on the road.”

The magistrate summoned the county constable Li Yun, and said: “Li Kui the Black Whirlwind has been captured in the manor of Squire Cao in Yiling. Take a strong force and bring him in, secretly. I don't want the whole countryside aroused. He might get away.”

Constable Li mustered thirty veteran soldiers. Fully armed, they proceeded rapidly towards Yiling Villas Yishui was a small county, and the story couldn't be suppressed. It was the talk of every market-place. “Black Whirlwind, who rioted in Jiangzhou, has been taken. Constable Li has been sent to get him!” Zhu Gui, in his brother's home outside the county town, also heard the news, and hurried to the rear to consult with him.

“That oaf has done it again! How am I going to rescue him? Song Jiang was afraid he'd get into trouble and sent me to keep an eye on him. Now he's been captured! If I can't save him, how am I going to face my brothers when I get back to the stronghold? What a mess!”

“Don't be upset,” urged Zhu Fu. “Constable Li Yun has superb skill with weapons. Forty or fifty armed men, together, couldn't down him. What chance would the two of us have, no matter how much we wished? It's brains, not brawn, that will do it. Li Yun is very fond of me. He often teaches me weapons play. I know how to deal with him, though I won't be able to stay here afterwards. Tonight we'll cook twenty or thirty catties of meat cut it into large chunks, prepare a dozen bottles of wine, and mix in a sleeping draught. At the fifth watch we two and a few helpers will carry the

stuff to a secluded place along the road. When Li Yun and his party come with their prisoner, we'll offer them wine to celebrate. They'll fall unconscious and we'll free Li Kui. How does that strike you?”

“Very clever. We can't delay. Let's prepare carefully and make an early start.”

“The problem is Li Yun doesn't drink much. Even if he passes out, he'll recover quickly. Another thing—if he finds out later, I won't be able to remain here.”

“Your tavern business isn't very good anyhow. Why not take your wife and children and go with me up the mountain and join our band? Gold and silver we share and share alike. You'll have whole sets of clothing. You'll be happy there. Have two of your assistants find a cart tonight and sent your family and valuables and luggage on ahead. Let them wait for us at the hamlet of Shilipai. Then we'll all go to the stronghold. I have some knockout medicine in my bag. Since Li Yun doesn't drink, sprinkle plenty on the meat and make him eat. He'll keel over too. After we rescue Li Kui, we'll go up the mountain together. Does that suit you?”

“All right, brother, that's the way it'll be.”

Zhu Fu sent men for a cart, made up four or five bundles and loaded them on. Bigger items were left behind. He told his wife and children to ride in the cart, and instructed two of his assistants to escort them and wait at the hamlet.

That night the brothers cooked the meat, cut it into large chunks and mixed in the drug. With the wine, it made up two shoulder-pole loads. They took also twenty or thirty empty bowls and some cooked vegetables, on which they sprinkled the drug as well, for those who didn't eat meat. A couple of assistants carried the two loads. The brothers themselves brought boxes of tidbits. By the fourth watch they were waiting near a crossing along the secluded mountain trail. At daybreak they heard in the distance the approaching sound of drums and gongs. Zhu Gui moved into the crossing.

In Yiling Village, the thirty-odd soldiers had drank half the night. Around the fourth watch, they set out with Li Kui, his hands bound behind him. Constable Li brought up the rear on horseback. They had been marching for a time when Zhu Fu stepped out and barred their path.

“Congratulations, Teacher,” he said. “Won't you rest a while?”

He scooped a jug of wine from a bucket and poured it into a large flagon, which he offered to Li Yun. Zhu Gui presented a platter of meat, and the assistants held up the boxes of tidbits. The constable dismounted and hurried forward.

“Young brother, you shouldn't have troubled to come all this way,” he said.

“I only wanted to show my respect,” Zhu Fu replied.

Li Yun accepted the flagon. Although he touched it to his lips, he did not drink. Zhu Fu knelt before him.

“I know you don't drink, Teacher. But this a victory libation. Have at least half a cup.”

Li Yun couldn't refuse. He took a couple of sips.

“If you don't want wine, you must have some meat,” Zhu Fu urged.

“I ate my fill tonight. I couldn't eat another thing.”

“You've come a long way, Teacher. You must be hungry again. We don't have anything fancy, but do taste a little, or I'll lose face badly.”

Zhu Fu selected and proffered two pieces of meat. Pressed with such solicitude, Li Yun had no choice but to eat them. Zhu Fu served wine also to the gentry, the village head and the hunters, filling their cups three times.

Zhu Gui called the soldiers and vassals to come and drink. Those varlets weren't fussy. They didn't care whether the wine and meat were cold or hot, tasty or otherwise—they tucked in. The provisions disappeared as fast as wispy clouds in the wind, as blossoms fallen into a stream.

Li Kui watched with shining eyes. The moment he saw Zhu Gui and his brother he knew it was a ruse.

“How about giving me something to eat, too?” he said deliberately.

“Meat and wine for a wicked devil like you?” Zhu Gui barked at him. “The executioner's waiting! Shut your mouth!”

Li Yun faced his soldiers. “Let's march. Quickly,” he ordered.

But the men only looked at each other, unable to stir. Lips trembling, legs numb, one by one they fell to the ground.

“I've been tricked,” Li Yun cried agitatedly. He tried to press forward. But his own head grew heavy and his legs light, and he melted into a heap, completely out.

Zhu Gui and his brother seized halberds. “Don't think you can get away,” they yelled, and rushed at the vassals and onlookers who had not drunk or eaten. The fast runners escaped, the slower were stabbed and killed.

With a roar Li Kui burst his bonds. He grabbed a halberd and charged towards the prostrate Li Yun. Zhu Fu stepped firmly in his path.

“Mind your manners. He's my teacher. A good man. You go on ahead.”

Li Kui assented. “But I'll burst if don't kill that old donkey Cao,” he swore.

He caught up with the squire and ran him through, then dispatched Li Gui's wife and the village head. His blood lust aroused, he slaughtered a whole row of hunters and all thirty soldiers. The onlookers and vassals, hating their parents for giving them only one pair of legs, fled deep into the wilds. Li Kui started to pursue.

Zhu Gui restrained him. “This has nothing to do with them,” he shouted. “Stop injuring ordinary people!”

Only then did Li Kui desist. He stripped some clothing from a dead soldier and put it on. He and the two brothers, halberds in hand, marched on along

the path.

“This is no good,” Zhu Fu said. “I've condemned my teacher to death. When he awakes, what will he be able to tell the magistrate? He's sure to chase after us. You two keep going. I'll wait for him here. He's always been so kind to me, so loyal to his friends. I'll ask him to go with us to the stronghold and join the band. I owe him that. Otherwise he'll suffer when he returns to the county office.”

“You're right, brother,” said Zhu Gui. “I'll go on with the cart. Li Kui will stay here to help you. If Li Yun doesn't catch up soon, don't be foolish and wait too long.”

“Naturally,” said Zhu Fu.

Zhu Gui continued his journey, alone.

Zhu Fu and Li Kui sat by the roadside. Sure enough, in less than a watch Li Yun, halberd tightly grasped, came flying down the path.

“Robbers, stay where you are,” he shouted. He rushed forward fiercely.

Li Kui was afraid he would hurt Zhu Fu. He jumped up and advanced to meet him with levelled halberd.

And as a result two new tigers were added to the company on Mount Liangshan, four men were welcomed in Fraternity Hall. Who was the victor in the battle between Black Whirlwind and the Black-Eyed Tiger? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 44
Elegant Panther Meets Dai Zong on a Path
Yang Xiong Meets Shi Xiu on an Avenue

Li Kui and Li Yun fought six or seven rounds, with neither besting the other. “Stop,” cried Zhu Fu, separating them with his halberd. “Listen to me.” The contestants paused.

“Teacher, please hear me,” he said to Li Yun. “You have been much kinder to me than I deserve, and have instructed me in lance and staff. I am very grateful. The problem is my brother Zhu Gui is one of the chieftains on Mount Liangshan. He was ordered by his leader Song Jiang the Timely Rain to look after brother Li Kui here. You were taking him to the authorities. How could Zhu Gui go back and face Song Jiang? We had to play that trick on you. Brother Li Kui wanted to finish you, but I wouldn't let him, and he killed only the soldiers. We were going to put ourselves a long way from here, but I guessed you couldn't return to the county office, and would have to come after us. I remembered how good you have always been to me, and decided to wait for you. Teacher, you're so intelligent. There's nothing you don't know. Today, scores of men have been killed and Black Whirlwind has escaped. How can you report back to the magistrate? You're sure to be put on trial, and there's no one to rescue you. Wouldn't it be better if you went with us up the mountain and joined Song Jiang's band? What do you say?”

Li Yun thought for several minutes. “Suppose they won't have me?” he finally said.

Zhu Fu laughed. “Surely you've heard of the Timely Rain from Shandong? He welcomes bold fellows from all over.”

Li Yun sighed. “I've become a man without a home or country. Luckily I have no wife or children, so I don't have to worry about the authorities arresting them. I suppose I'll just have to go with you.”

Li Kui chuckled. “Brother, why didn't you say that earlier?” He gave Li Yun a deep bow.

Since the constable had no family or property, the three men set out together after the cart. Halfway, they caught up with Zhu Gui, who was delighted. They had an uneventful journey. As they neared Mount Liangshan they were met by Ma Lin and Zheng Tianshou, who said: “We've been sent down to inquire about you. Now that we've seen you, we'll go back and report.” The two scouts went on ahead.

The following day the four gallants, with Zhu Fu's family, arrived at Fraternity Hall in the stronghold on Mount Liangshan. Zhu Gui came forward and introduced Li Yun to Chao Gai and Song Jiang and the other leaders.

“This is Li Yun, a constable of Yishui County. His nickname is the Black-Eyed Tiger.”

Then he introduced his brother. “This is my younger brother Zhu Fu. He's known as the Smiling Tiger.”

Li Kui kowtowed to Song Jiang, and his two axes were restored to him. He related how he had taken his mother from Yiling, how she had been devoured by a savage beast, and how, because of this, he had killed four tigers. Tears coursed down his cheeks as he told his story. But when he went on to relate how he killed the robber who was masquerading as himself, everybody laughed.

“You killed four tigers,” Chao Gai and Song Jiang said, smiling, “and today you are adding two live tigers to our stronghold. That calls for a celebration.”

All the assembled bold fellows were pleased. Cows and horses were slaughtered and a feast was laid. Chao Gai gave the two newly arrived chieftains seats on his left, before Bai Sheng.

Wu Yong said: “Our fortress has become quite prosperous recently. Gallant men from everywhere are flocking to join us. This is due to the virtue of brothers Chao Gai and Song Jiang and is the good fortune of you all. Under these circumstances, we instruct Zhu Gui to resume control of his tavern east of the mountain, and let Shi Yong and Hou Jian return. Zhu Fu and his family shall be given a house to live in. Our fortress has many enterprises today. It's not like before. We're going to set up three more taverns. They will keeps tabs on what is going on outside, and aid fighters coming up and going from the mountain. If the imperial court sends out a bandit-catching force they can inform us. If the troops head this way, we can prepare.

“West of the mountain is a wide plain. Tong Wei and Tong Meng will go there with a dozen men and open a tavern. LiLi with another dozen will open a tavern to the south, Shi Yong with the same number will set one up to the north. All will build pavilions overlooking the water and prepare signal arrows and boats to ferry men across. Any military activity, urgent or otherwise, they will report at once.

“Before the mountain we shall build three large gates, and Du Qian will be in charge. He is excused from all other duties and is not to leave his post. Tao Zongwang will supervise all labor—the digging of ditches, channels and canals, repairing the walls and ramparts, the building of a large road in front of the mountain. He originally was a farmer and he knows about these things. Jiang Jiang will be in charge of the granary. He'll check everything that goes in and out, and keep accounts. Xiao Rang shall issue all documents and passes for movement within and outside the fortress, up and down the mountain, and through the three gates, and the identifications of chieftains, big and small.

“We'll trouble Jian Dajian to carve all necessary troop tallies, document seals, and stone plaques. Hou Jian will look after clothing, armor, pennants and flags. Li Yun will be in charge of buildings and halls. Ma Lin will surprise the construction and repair of fighting ships, large and small. Song Wan and Bai Sheng will fortify and defend the Shore of Golden Sands. Stumpy Tiger Wang and Zheng Tianshou will do the same at Duck's Bill Shore. Mu Chun and Zhu Fu will receive all money and grain coming into the fortress. Lu Fang and Guo Sheng will take charge of the rest chambers in the two wings on either side of Fraternity Hall. Song Qing will arrange all banquets.”

For the next three days everyone fasted. No need to say more. It was a time of peace for Liangshan Marsh. The men trained daily, practicing their military arts. On the water the chieftains taught navigation and swimming, and fighting aboard ships. Of that no more need be said.

One day Song Jiang was chatting with Chao Gai, Wu Yong and the other leaders. “We brothers are all here together,” he said. “But Gongsun still

hasn't returned. I thought a hundred days would be plenty for him to see his mother and teacher in Jizhou. His time is long since up and we have no news of him. Can he have broken his promise to us? I wish brother Dai Zong would find out what's happened, and why he hasn't come back."

Dai Zong said he would go. Song Jiang was very pleased.

"Only you can travel so quickly. We'll be expecting news from you in ten days."

Dai Zong bid them all farewell. Early the next morning, disguised as a lieutenant of the Imperial Guards, he left Mount Liangshan for Jizhou. He tied the four charms to his legs and performed his magic ritual. On the road he ate only vegetables and vegetable soups. In three days he reached the border of Yishui County. He heard a man say: "A few days ago Black Whirlwind got away and many people were killed. It seems Constable Li Yun was involved. No one knows where they've gone. They still haven't been taken."

Dai Zong smiled coldly.

While travelling that day he observed in the distance a man coming towards him, a lance of hollow iron alloy in his hand. The man halted when he saw how rapidly Dai Zong was moving.

"Marvellous Traveller!"

Dai Zong peered at the person who had hailed him. Standing in a path on the slope was a big fellow with a round head and large ears, a straight nose and a square mouth, fine brows and wide-set eyes, a narrow waist and broad shoulders.

"We haven't met, sir," said Dai Zong. "How do you know my name?"

"Then you truly are the Marvellous Traveller?" The man cast his weapon aside, dropped to his knees and kowtowed.

Dai Zong hastily raised him up and returned the courtesy. “What is your name, sir?”

“I'm called Yang Lin, from the prefecture of Zhangde. Mainly, I live outside the law, and I'm known in the gallant fraternity as the Elegant Panther. Several months ago I met Master Gongsun Sheng in a tavern on the road. We drank together and he told me how chieftains Chao Gai and Song Jiang on Mount Liangshan welcomed bold men, how loyal and fine they are. He wrote a letter on introduction for me and urged me to take it to the fortress. I didn't think myself worthy, but Master Gongsun said: 'At Lijia Entry is a tavern run by Zhu Gui. He gets men across who want to join the band. The recruiting officer who reports new arrivals to the leaders is Superintendent Dai. He's known as the Marvellous Traveller. He can cover eight hundred *li* in a single day.' You walked so swiftly, I shouted your name, just to see how you'd react. I didn't dream it was really you. Heaven has willed that we should have this chance encounter.”

“It's because of Master Gongsun that I'm on my way to Jizhou. I'm trying to get news of him. Chao and Song have ordered me to find out what's happened to him and bring him back to the fortress. I didn't expect to have the pleasure of meeting you.”

“Although I'm from Zhangde, I've been to every shire in the prefecture of Jizhou. If you won't scorn my services, I'll be glad to take you around.”

“I would consider myself fortunate. After we've found Master Gongsun, we'll go to Mount Liangshan together. There will be time enough.”

Yang Lin was very pleased. He kowtowed to Dai Zong and pledged himself his blood brother. The superintendent removed his magic charms and the two continued on slowly. In the evening they rested in a village inn. Yang Lin treated Dai Zong to food and wine.

“When I'm performing my magic I'm not allowed to eat meat,” the superintendent said.

They dined on vegetable dishes. The following morning they rose early, cooked breakfast and prepared to set forth.

“I'll never be able to keep up if you walk in your magic manner,” said Yang Lin. “I'm afraid we can't travel together.”

Dai Zong smiled. “I've a way to take people with me. I'll put two of the charms on your legs, perform the ritual, and you'll be able to walk just as fast. You can travel or halt whenever you like. Otherwise, you certainly wouldn't be able to stay with me.”

“I'm just a common mortal. I don't have your spiritual qualities.”

“That doesn't matter. Using my magic formula I can take with me anyone I want. I have only to perform the ritual and we travel together. If I stick to a vegetable diet, there's no problem.”

He tied two of the charms on Yang Lin's legs and two on his own. Then he performed the ritual, blew on the charms, and they lightly set forth, moving rapidly or slowly, as Dai Zong saw fit. On the road they talked of deeds of the gallant fraternity. Although they proceeded in a leisurely manner, without being aware of it they covered a great deal of ground.

By late morning they arrived at a place surrounded by high mountains. In the middle was a post station for changing horses.

“This is Horse Watering Valley,” said Yang Lin. “There used to be a big band of men on the tall mountain ahead. I don't know about lately. It's called Horse Watering Valley because it's so pretty here, with winding streams amid jade-green hills.”

As they reached the foot of the mountain a clamor of beating gongs and pounding drums broke out. A hundred or two bandits emerged and blocked their path. Two big fellows in the lead, both carrying halberds, shouted at them:

“Stand where you are! Who are you pricks and where are you going? Pay for a free passage, if you have any sense, and we'll spare your lives!”

Yang Lin grinned. “Brother,” he said, “watch me knock off these louts.” Twirling his lance, he sped forward.

The two big fellows advanced to meet his fierce charge. But as he drew nearer, the one in the lead exclaimed: “Don't make a move. Aren't you brother Yang Lin?”

Yang Lin halted. Only then did he recognize his adversary. The man, weapon in hand, bowed deeply and ordered his tall companion to do the same. Yang Lin called Dai Zong over.

“I'd like you to meet two brothers of mine,” he said.

“Who are they? How do they know you?”

“This bold fellow, Deng Fei, is the one who knows me. He's from Xiangyang prefecture in the Gaitian District. Because of his red eyebrows he's known in the gallant fraternity as the Fiery-Eyed Lion. He is skilled with the iron chain weapon. When he flails it, no one can touch him. We operated together many times, but I haven't seen him in five years. I never thought I'd meet him here, today.”

Deng Fei indicated Dai Zong. “Who is this brother?” he asked Yang Lin. “He's obviously no ordinary man.”

“He's Dai Zong, the Marvellous Traveller, one of the bold fellows of Liangshan Marsh.”

“Not Superintendent Dai of Jiangzhou, who can walk eight hundred *li* in a single day?”

“The same,” Dai Zong acknowledged.

The two brigands hastily bowed and said: “We've often heard your great name. Who would have thought that today we could pay our respects?”

“What is the name of this gallant fellow?” asked Dai, indicating the second leader.

“Meng Kang, from Zhending Prefecture. He used to be a boat builder,” Deng Fei explained. “He was constructing a large vessel to transport a load of marble. But the official in charge kept hurrying and persecuting him to

such an extent that Meng killed him. He abandoned his family and fled to the greenwood where he became a robber. That was some years ago. Because he's tall and fair and powerfully built, he's been given the nickname the Jade Flagpole."

Dai Zong was very pleased.

The four chatted a while and Yang Lin asked: "How long have you two been together?"

"Over a year," said Deng Fei. "Six months ago we met another brother, Pei Xuan, a scribe from the prefecture of Jingzhao. Highly competent at writing complaints, honest and intelligent, he's a man who would never commit the slightest wrong, and was known locally as Ironclad Virtue. He's also skilled with weapons and has more than his share of cleverness and courage. But the imperial court appointed a corrupt prefect to Jiangzhao who framed him and ordered that he be exiled to the island of Shamen. As he was passing through, we killed his escort and rescued him, and he took refuge with us. We formed a band of nearly three hundred. He's excellent with a pair of swords, and since he's the eldest among us, we've chosen him our leader.' Won't you come up to our humble stronghold and meet him?"

Deng Fei instructed his men to bring horses. Dai Zong and Yang Lin removed the charms from their legs and swung into the saddles. The party started up the trail. Before long they reached the fortress, where they dismounted. Pei Xuan, who had already been informed, hastened down the steps to greet them.

Dai Zong and Yang Lin looked at him. He was indeed a handsome man, fair complected, stout, with a calm, steady manner. The two were very pleased, and Pei Xuan invited them into the meeting hall. After courtesies were exchanged, he placed Dai Zong in the seat of honor. Then Yang Lin, himself, Deng Fei and Meng Kang were also seated, in that order. Hosts and guests later joined in a feast, and drank to the accompaniment of fifes and drums.

Dai spoke of the recruitment program of Chao and Song, and how they welcomed bold men from all over. He told of their kindness, virtue and

benevolence, and their many fine qualities, of how harmony prevailed among the chieftains, of the eight hundred *li* of territory controlled by Mount Liangshan, of the strength of the fortress walls and ramparts, of the misty waters that surrounded them on every side. He explained how, with their large force of men and horses, they had no fear of attack by government troops.

“We have a mountain stronghold here too,” said Pei Xuan, “and about three hundred horses. Our wealth would fill ten carts, not counting our grain and fodder. We've also nearly five hundred men. If you don't scorn us as too inferior, brother, I wish you would take us to your big fortress and let us join your band. Perhaps we could make some puny efforts that would be of use. How does my idea strike you?”

Dai Zong was delighted. “Chao and Song are very straightforward in their dealings with people,” he said. “If we can get the assistance of you gentlemen it will be like adding flowers to embroidery. Since you've decided, please pack your belongings. When Yang Lin and I come back from seeing Master Gongsun in Jizhou we'll all disguise ourselves as government troops and march through the night.”

Everyone was pleased. They drank until they were mellow, then removed to the pavilion on the rear slope overlooking Horse Watering Valley, where they continued drinking and admired the scenery.

“How beautiful,” said Dai Zong. “Lovely and secluded. How did you two happen to come here?”

“Originally this was the lair of a few worthless varlets,” said Deng Fei. “We simply took over.”

They all laughed. The five soon were very drunk. Pei Xuan performed a dance with his two swords. Dai Zong was fulsome in his praise. The visitors spent the night in the stronghold.

The next morning Dai Zong and Yang Lin announced they were leaving. None of the entreaties of their three hosts could persuade them to remain. The brigand leaders saw them off down the mountain and returned to the

fortress. They began packing and getting ready to move. Of that we'll say no more.

Travelling by day and resting at night, Dai Zong and Yang Lin soon reached the outskirts of Jizhou Town. There they put up at an inn.

“Brother,” said Yang Lin, “Master Gongsu is a student of Taoism. He's probably in some mountain grove. He wouldn't live in town.”

“You're right,” Dai Zong agreed.

They walked around the outskirts of Jizhou, inquiring about Master Gongsun, but no one knew him. They went back to the inn. The next morning they tried more distant villages and market-places, again without any success. They returned to the inn once more.

“Could there be someone in the town who knows him?” Dai Zong wondered on the third day.

He and Yang Lin went looking in Jizhou. Every reliable person they asked said: “Don't know him. Are you sure he lives in town? He's probably in some famous mountain monastery in an outlying county.”

They came to a large street. Further down, musicians were welcoming an approaching man. Dai and Yang stopped to watch. First came two prison guards. One toted colorfully wrapped gifts. The other carried bolts of satin and brocade. Behind, shaded by a black silk umbrella, walked a prison executioner. A fine figure of a man, he wore a gown of embroidered blue indigo. His long eyebrows extended into his sideboards, his eyes turned up at the corners, his complexion was pale brown, and he had a wispy moustache. He was a Henanese, and his name was Yang Xiong. He had come to Jizhou with a paternal cousin who had been appointed prefect, and had remained ever since. The prefect who succeeded his cousin also knew him, and made him warden of the town's two prisons, as well as the official executioner. Yang Xiong was a first-rate man with weapons, but his complexion was rather pale, and so he was nicknamed the Pallid.

To his rear another prison guard carried a sword with a demon's head hilt. They were returning from an execution, and friends, who had bedecked Yang Xiong with red ribbons and offered him their compliments, were seeing him home.

As the procession was passing Dai Zong and Yang Lin, a group of people, wine cups in hand, stopped it at an intersection. Seven or eight soldiers emerged from a side street, headed by a certain Zhang Bao, better known as Kick a Sheep to Death. He was part of the garrison guarding the town walls. His cronies were impoverished idlers from in and around the town who were always extorting money. Zhang had been reprimanded several times, but to no avail. It irked him that Yang Xiong, not a local man, should be feared and respected.

Now, seeing the Henanese showered with gifts, and himself backed by a gang of half-drunken knaves, he decided to vent his spleen. He pushed his way through the crowd of well-wishers at the intersection.

“My respects, Warden,” he cried.

“Come and have a drink, brother,” said Yang Xiong.

“It's not wine I want from you, but a hundred or so strings of cash!”

“Although I know you, brother, we've never had any financial dealings. How can you ask me for money?”

“You've squeezed plenty of riches out of the people today. Why not share some with me?”

“It's only that others wanted to give me a bit of face. I didn't squeeze anything. What are you trying to provoke? You're military and I'm civil administration. One has nothing to do with other.”

Zhang Bao did not reply, but called to his men, who rushed forward and seized the gifts and brocades. “Mannerless rogues,” shouted Yang Xiong, incensed, advancing to intervene. Zhang Bao clutched him by the front of his robe, while two scamps grabbed his arms from behind. The mass attack

was too much, and the guards turned and fled. Yang Xiong, held powerless, could only fume, unable to break lose.

While all this turmoil was going on, a big fellow carrying a load of brushwood on a shoulder-pole approached. He saw the scoundrels holding Yang Xiong, and his sense of fairness was offended. He set down his load and pushed through the crowd.

“Why have you attacked the warden?” he demanded.

Zhang Bao glared. “Miserable wretch of a beggar, what business is it of yours?”

The big fellow was enraged. He lifted Zhang by the hair and flipped him to the ground. Before Zhang's ruffians could come to his defence, one punch apiece from the big fellow sent them reeling. Yang Xiong, freed, brought his own skill into play. His fists flew like shuttles, knocking rascals flat left and right. Things looked bad for Zhang Bao. He crawled to his feet and scooted. The furious Yang Xiong pursued with large strides, Zhang following the men who had snatched the bundles, Yang Xiong chasing after Zhang. They disappeared into a lane.

The big fellow was still slugging away at the intersection. Dai Zong and Yang Lin watched in admiration. “Quite a man.” they said. “Truly 'He sees injustice and leaps into the fray.'“ They went up to him.

“Bold fighter,” they urged, “for our sakes, desist.” They hauled him into a lane, Yang Lin carrying his brushwood, Dai Zong holding his arm and guiding him into a tavern. Yang Lin set down the load and followed them inside. The big fellow clasped his hands together gratefully.

“Thank you, brothers, for getting me out of that predicament.”

“We two are strangers,” said Dai Zong. “While we admired your gallantry, we were afraid you might hit someone too hard and kill him, so we pulled you away. Please have a few cups with us. Now that we've met, let's be friends.”

“You not only help me, you invite me to wine. It's really not right.”

“'Within the bounds of the four seas, all men are brothers.' You mustn't speak like that,” said Yang Lin. “Please be seated.”

Dai Zong urged him to sit at the head of the table, but the young fellow wouldn't consider it. Finally Dai Zong and Yang Lin sat there and their guest seated himself opposite. They summoned the waiter. Yang Lin gave him two pieces of silver.

“Never mind asking what we want. Just bring us anything that goes with wine, and put it all on one bill.”

The waiter took the money and left. He returned with vegetable dishes and various tidbits to consume while drinking. The three men downed several cups.

“What is your name, sir? Where are you from?” asked Dai Zong. “I'm called Shi Xiu. My home is the prefecture of Jiankang, in Jinling. Since childhood I've been fond of weapons. Whenever I see injustice I feel I must lend a hand, so I've been nicknamed the Rash. I was travelling with my uncle, who was selling sheep and horses, but he died on the road, and I soon lost our capital. I couldn't go home, and I remained here in Jizhou, selling brushwood for a living. Since you've honored me with your acquaintance, what I tell you is the absolute truth.”

“A certain matter has brought us here,” said Dai Zong, “and that has enabled us to meet you and witness your courage. But you'll never prosper, selling brushwood. Why not join the gallant fraternity, and be happy the rest of your days?”

“I have some skill with arms, nothing more. How can I aspire to happiness?”

“In these times it doesn't pay to be too proper. The addlepated emperor is kept in the dark by corrupt officials. My understanding wasn't terribly clear, but on impulse I joined Song Jiang's band in Liangshan Marsh. Now we all get fair shares of gold and silver, and receive whole sets of clothing. Sooner

or later the imperial court will declare a general amnesty and we'll all be given official posts."

Shi Xiu sighed. "I'd love to go, but I don't know how to get in."

"If you really would like to join, I could write you an introduction."

"May I have the temerity to ask you two gentlemen your names?"

"I am called Dai Zong, and this brother is called Yang Lin."

"Not the Marvellous Traveller, famed among bold men?"

"I am that humble person," Dai Zong acknowledged. He told Yang Lin to take ten ounces of silver from their bundle and give it to Shi Xiu for his business.

Shi Xiu had to be urged repeatedly before he would accept the money. Now that he knew who Dai Zong was, he was eager to talk about joining the band. But just then a search party was heard outside the tavern, making inquiries. Dai Zong and the other two looked. It was Yang Xiong and more than twenty policemen. They started coming in. Startled by the large number, Dai Zong and Yang Lin took advantage of the excitement to slip away.

Shi Xiu rose and greeted Yang Xiong. "Warden, where are you coming from?"

"I've been looking all over for you, brother, and you've been here drinking wine. Those oafs were holding my arms and I couldn't go into action until you rescued me. I ran after them to get my packages and had to leave you behind. When these brothers saw me pummeling them, they pitched in to help, and I got my gifts and brocades back. By the time I returned, you were gone. Someone said 'A couple of travellers pressed him to drink with them,' and so we've been searching the taverns."

"They're from out of town, and they invited me to have a few cups. We were just chatting. I didn't know you were looking for me."

Yang Xiong was very pleased to have found Shi Xiu. “What is your name, sir?” he asked. “Where is your home, and what are you doing here?”

Shi Xiu related the same story he had told Dai Zong and Yang Lin.

“Where have the travellers gone?” asked Yang Xiong.

“They saw you coming in with a large party and thought there might be trouble, so they left.”

Yang Xiong spoke to the policemen, “Let the waiter bring two jugs of wine and give each of you men three large bowlfuls. Then you can leave me here. I'll see you again tomorrow.”

The men drank and departed. Yang Xiong turned to Shi Xiu.

“You mustn't treat me like a stranger. I imagine you have no relatives here. Let's pledge each other blood brothers. What do you say?”

Shi Xiu was delighted. “May I ask you age, Warden?”

“Twenty-nine.”

“I am twenty-eight. Please be seated and accept my kowtow as your younger brother.”

Shi Xiu kowtowed four times. Yang Xiong was very pleased. He instructed the waiter to bring wine and tidbits and said to Shi Xiu: “Today we must drink till we're good and soused.”

While they were indulging, Yang Xiong's father-in-law, Master Pan, entered with half a dozen men. Yang Xiong rose.

“What are you doing here, father-in-law?”

“I heard that you were in a fight, and came to help.”

“Thanks to this brother, I was rescued. He gave Zhang Bao such a drubbing that the rogue's afraid of his shadow. Shi Xiu and I have pledged each other

blood brothers.”

“Fine. Excellent. Give these brothers who've come with me some wine.”

Yang Xiong ordered the waiter to serve them three bowls each. The men drank and left. Yang then asked his father-in-law to be seated at the side of the table. He himself sat at the head, with Shi Xiu opposite. The waiter poured the wine. Pan saw what a big, heroic type Shi Xiu was, and he liked his looks.

“My son-in-law won't go wrong with you two helping each other,” he said. “No one will dare pick on him now as he goes about his official duties.” And he asked: “What is your line of business?”

“My father was a butcher.”

“Do you know how to slaughter?”

Shi Xiu laughed. “Of course. I was raised in a butcher's family.”

“I used to be one, myself, but I'm too old. I've only this one son-in-law, and he's an official. So I've had to give it up.”

The three drank until they were mellow, then had the bill added. Shi Xiu gave the tavern the brushwood to cover the wine bill. All went home with Yang Xiong.

“Wife,” he called, when they had entered the door, “come and meet your young brother-in-law.”

From behind the portiere a voice retorted: “Since when have you had a younger brother?”

“Don't ask. Just come out.”

The door curtain was raised and a young woman emerged. She had been born on the seventh day of the seventh month, and she was called Clever Cloud. Formerly she had been married to a petty official in Jizhou

prefecture named Wang. After two years, he died, and she married Yang Xiong. They had been husband and wife for less than a year.

Shi Xiu hailed her respectfully. “Sister-in-law, please be seated.” He dropped to his knees to kowtow.

“I'm much too young,” Clever Cloud protested. “How can I accept your courtesy?”

“I've acknowledged him my blood brother, today,” said Yang. “That makes you his sister-in-law. You may receive half the full obeisance.”

Like pushing a golden mountain, like a falling pillar of jade, Shi Xiu kowtowed four times. The young woman returned him two curtsies. He was invited into the parlour while a room was prepared, after which he was urged to rest. But enough of idle chatter.

The next day, as Yang was leaving for his office, he instructed his household: “Have clothes and headgear made for Shi Xiu.” He also told them to fetch his guest's luggage and bundles from the inn.

As to Dai Zong and Yang Lin, on leaving the tavern they returned to their inn outside the town and rested, continuing their search for Gongsun the following day. But in the two succeeding days they met no one who knew him, nor had they the slightest clue as to where he had gone. After talking it over, they packed their luggage and left Jizhou the same day for Horse Watering Valley. There they rejoined Pei Xuan, Deng Fei and Meng Kang and their men, and all disguised themselves as government officers. They set out for Liangshan Marsh that same night.

Dai Zong made an impressive contribution, bringing such a large force of men and horses to the mountain. A feast was laid in celebration. Of that we'll say no more.

Master Pan offered Shi Xiu a proposition. He said: “At the rear of a dead-end lane behind our house we have an empty building. There's well water conveniently at hand. It would make a good butcher shop and you could live there and look after everything.”

Shi Xiu inspected the place. It was indeed an ideal spot. Pan found an old skilled assistant of his to do the heavy work. He said Shi need only keep the accounts. The young man agreed. He had the assistant decorate the tables, the tubs and the chopping blocks in black and green, sharpen all the knives and arrange the counters. Shi Xiu put the pig pens in order and drove in a dozen fat swine. On an auspicious day, he formally opened the shop. Neighbors and relatives arrived to offer congratulations and hang streamers of red. This was followed by two days of festive drinking. Yang Xiong and his family were happy to have Shi Xiu running the shop. Of this, there's nothing much to be told. Pan and Shi did the buying and selling, and time passed quickly. Soon, two months had gone by. It was late autumn and the beginning of winter. Shi Xiu changed into brand new clothing, inside and out.

One morning, he rose at the fifth watch and went to another county to buy hogs. Returning there days later, he found the shop closed and the chopping blocks and knives all put away. Shi Xiu had a subtle mind. He was a man who kept his own counsel.

“As the old saying goes: 'Good times don't last forever, all flowers fade,'“ he thought. “Brother is often away on official business and doesn't bother about home affairs. Seeing that I've bought new clothes, sister-in-law must be saying things behind my back. And certain persons are sure to be spreading stories about me because I've been gone a couple of days. They're suspicious of me, so they've closed the shop. Why should I wait for them to say it openly? I'll just resign and go home. As the old saying goes: 'Who wants to do the same thing all his life?'”

He drove the hogs into the pens, changed his clothes, packed his belongings, wrote out a detailed account, and entered the family house through the rear door. Master Pan had laid out a modest repast. He invites Shi to sit down and drink.

“You've had a long, hard trip, bringing in those hogs,” said Pan.

“I did no more than my duty, old sir. Here are my accounts. May Heaven strike me dead if I've kept a penny for myself.”

“What kind of talk is this? There's no question about it.”

“I've been away from home six or seven years. It's time I went back. I'm handing in my accounts. Tonight, I'll take leave of brother and tomorrow morning I'll depart.”

The old man laughed. “You've misunderstood. You must stay on. Let me explain.”

Pan spoke only a few words. And as a result, in gratitude to his benefactor, a warrior with his three-foot blade dispatched a wicked monk to the depths of Hell.

What were the words which Master Pan spoke to Shi Xiu? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 45
Yang Xiong, Drunk, Berates Clever Cloud
Shi Xiu, Shrewdly, Kills Pei Ruhai

“I know what you're thinking,” said Master Pan. “You come home after an absence of two days and find that all the butcher's implements have been put away. Of course you assume we've closed down, and so you want to go. Even if our business wasn't as good as it is now, even if we really did close down, we'd still keep you in our home. The fact of the matter is this: Today is the second anniversary of the death of Wang the Scribe, my daughter's first husband. We're going to have some prayers said for him, that's why we've shut up shop for a couple of days. We've asked monks to come tomorrow from the Grateful Retribution Monastery to conduct a service and we'd like you to lock after it. I'm too old to stay up all night. I thought I'd talk to you about it, first.”

“In view of what you've said, old sir, I'm willing to remain a while longer.”

“Don't let your imagination run away with you, in the future. Just do what's proper according to your station.”

They drank several cups of wine and ate a few vegetable dishes, and that was the end of it.

The next morning lay brothers arrived bearing scriptures, and set the scene for the ceremony. They installed idols and sacrificial implements; drums, gongs, bells and chimes; incense, flowers, lamps and candles. In the kitchen, meatless dishes were prepared.

Yang Xiong came home late in the afternoon. “I'm on duty at the prison tonight,” he said to Shi Xiu. “I can't be here. May I trouble you, brother, to take care of matters?”

“Don't give it a thought. I'll keep an eye on things for you.”

Yang Xiong departed, and Shi Xiu posted himself at the front door. Just as dawn was breaking the following day, a young monk pushed aside the gate screen and entered the courtyard. Palms piously together in the Buddhist fashion, he bowed deeply to Shi Xiu, who returned the courtesy.

“Please be seated, Reverend.”

A lay brother carrying two boxes on the ends of a shoulderpole had come in behind the monk.

“Old sir,” Shi Xiu called. “There's a monk here to see you.”

Master Pan emerged and the monk hailed him: “Godfather, why haven't we seen you at our monastery?”

“I haven't had time since opening this shop.”

“I've brought some paltry gifts to commemorate the scribe's passing away. Just some noodles and a few packets of dates.”

“Aiya, Reverend, there's no need for you to spend any money,” said the old man. But he said to Shi Xiu: “Please take them for me.”

Shi Xiu carried the packages inside. He instructed a servant to bring tea and serve it to the monk.

Meanwhile, the girl came downstairs. She wore only light mourning attire and make-up, since more would not be appropriate to a woman who had remarried.

“Who are the gifts from?” she asked Shi Xiu. “A monk who calls your father 'godfather'.”

The girl smiled. “That must be Pei Ruhai, who's known as the Preceptor, a very honest monk. He used to run his family's silk-thread shop before he joined the order in the Grateful Retribution Monastery. Because his superior is a secular prelate, Ruhai is able to call my father godfather. He's just two years older than me. I call him my reverend brother. His name in the order is Master Hai. Wait till you hear him chant tonight. He has a beautiful voice.”

“So that's how it is,” Shi Xiu thought. He already had a one-tenth inkling of what was brewing.

She went out to meet the monk. His hands clasped behind his back, Shi Xiu followed as far as the door and watched from behind the curtain. The monk rose when the girl emerged, placed his palms together and bowed.

“You had no right to spend money on presents,” she said.

“They're only small things, sister. Not worth mentioning.”

“How can you say that? We shouldn't take gifts from a man who's renounced the world.”

“We've built a new Hall for the Spirits of the Departed on Land and Sea. We wish you would honor us with a visit and look it over. But perhaps the warden would disapprove.”

“He's not so petty. When my mother was dying I promised to have prayers offered for those who died in childbirth. I've been meaning to go to your

temple and trouble you to have this done."

"But such prayers are my duty. No trouble at all. Whatever you wish me to do, you've only to ask."

"Then please chant a few scriptures for my mother."

A little maid served tea. Clever Cloud wiped the rim of a cup with her handkerchief, then proffered it respectfully in both hands to the young monk. He stared boldly and greedily into her eyes, and she gazed back at him, smiling.

"Lust engenders boundless audacity," as the saying goes. Shi Xiu observed all this from behind the door curtain. By now he had guessed two-tenths. "Believe not that in straight forwardness there is only honesty. Beware, rather that evil lurks behind the guise of virtue," he said to himself. "That girl has dropped me hints several times, but I've treated her strictly as a sister-in-law. So that's the kind of wench she is! If I catch her, don't think I won't act on Yang Xiong's behalf!"

He thought about it, three-tenths sure. He raised the door curtain and went outside. The monk hastily set down his teacup and addressed him.

"Sir, please be seated."

"This brother-in-law is a new blood brother of my husband," the girl explained.

"Where are you from, sir?" the monk queried, with polite gravity. "What is your name?"

"Shi Xiu, from Jinling," was the curt reply. "Because I fight injustice, even when it's no affair of mine, I'm known as the Rash. I'm a crude fellow without any manners. Forgive me."

"Not at all, not at all! I must fetch some more monks for the ceremony," the young man said hastily. He headed for the gate.

"Come back soon, reverend brother," the girl called.

He hurried away without reply. The girl saw him as far as the gate, then returned to the house. Shi Xiu stood outside the door, his head bent in thought. He was by this time four-tenths sure.

Later, a beadle came and lit the candles and the incense. Shortly after, Hai the Preceptor returned with several monks. Master Pan asked Shi Xiu to receive them. After they drank their tea, they began beating drums and gongs and singing verses in praise of the departed. Hai and another young monk conducted the ritual—ringing bells, burning prayers to the gods, offering sacrificial food to the Defenders of Heaven and the Chief Watcher of the Celestial Altar, entreating that the spirit of the departed Wang the Scribe be allowed to enter Heaven soon.

The girl Clever Cloud, simply adorned, entered the garden. She lit a stick of incense, inserted it in a small burner which she held in her hands, and prayed before the idol. This aroused Hai the Preceptor to greater fervor. He rang his bells and gave full vent to his voice. The sight of the luscious Clever Cloud, piously undulating, caused the other monks to reel and stagger.

When the prayers of entreaty for the dead ended, the monks were invited inside for a meal. Hai sat behind the others. He turned his head, looked at the girl and smiled. She put her hand over her mouth to smother a laugh. Their eyes exchanged loving glances.

Shi Xiu observed it all. He was five-tenths annoyed. The monks were each served a few cups of wine before their vegetarian meal, and were given some money. Master Pan said he was weary, and retired. When they had finished eating, the monks went out for a stroll to aid digestion, then returned to the ceremonial arena.

Shi Xiu's irritation had reached sixth-tenths. Claiming to have a stomach ache, he lay down in a room behind the partition wall.

Clever Cloud, her passions stirred, didn't care whether anyone was watching her or not. She brought tea and fruit and cakes to the monks, who were once again beating drums and gongs. Hai abjured them to concentrate on their prayers and supplications. The ritual continued. By midnight the

other monks were exhausted, but Hai was only getting into stride. He chanted loud and clear. Clever Cloud, who had been standing for a long time by the door curtain, was inflamed with desire. She instructed her little maid to tell Reverend Brother Hai she wished to speak to him. The scoundrel hastened over. She put her hand on his sleeve.

“When you come for the memorial service money tomorrow you can talk to papa about those prayers for mama. Don't forget.”

“I won't. I'll say: 'If we're to fulfil her wish, we should do it-promptly,'“ said the young monk. And he added: “That brother-in-law of yours looks tough.”

The girl tossed her head. “Don't pay any attention to him. He's not a real relative.”

“I won't worry, then,” said Hai. He slipped his fingers inside the girl's sleeve and pinched her hand.

She made a pretense of pulling the door curtain between them. That rogue of a shaven-pate grinned and went off to continue his prayers for the dead.

Shi Xiu, feigning sleep behind the partition, had missed none of this. He was seven-tenths positive. The ceremony ended at the fifth watch. After the idol was removed and the paper money burned, the monks thanked their hosts and departed, and Clever Cloud went upstairs to bed.

“Brother Yang Xiong is chivalrous, but that wife is a sexy bitch,” Shi Xiu said to himself indignantly. Repressing his anger, he went back to sleep in the butcher shop.

The next day Yang Xiong came home, but Shi Xiu didn't say a word. After eating, Yang again left and Hai the Preceptor, wearing a fresh cassock, returned once more. On hearing of his arrival, the girl quickly descended the stairs. She hurried out to greet him, invited him into the house and ordered tea.

“You must be exhausted from all those ceremonies last night, reverend brother,” said the girl. “And we still haven't paid.”

“Not worth mentioning. I've come about those prayers your mother wanted read. Just write out what you want me to say and I'll include it while chanting scriptures at the monastery.”

“Excellent,” said Clever Cloud. She told the little maid to ask her father to join them.

Master Pan entered and thanked the monk. “I couldn't stay up so late last night, and had to leave you,” he said apologetically. “I didn't expect Shi Xiu to develop a stomach ache. You were left with no one to look after you. I'm very sorry.”

“Think nothing of it, godfather.”

The girl said: “I want to fulfil mama's wish to have prayers said for women who died in childbirth. Reverend brother says he can include them in the scriptures which will be chanted in the monastery temple tomorrow. I suggest he go back now, and tomorrow, after breakfast, you and I will visit the temple and attend the prayers. We'll have done our duty.”

“All right,” said Master Pan. “But I'm afraid we'll be busy at the butcher shop tomorrow, with no one to handle the money.”

“You've got Shi Xiu. What's there to worry about?”

“Your wish is my desire, daughter. Tomorrow we'll go.”

Clever Cloud gave Hai some silver and said: “Please don't scorn this as too small. Perhaps you'll have some meatless noodles for us when we call at your monastery tomorrow.”

“I shall respectfully await your coming to burn incense.” Hai stood up. “Many thanks. I'll divide this money among the other monks and look forward to your visit.”

The girl saw him off to the outside of the gate.

Shi Xiu, in the butcher shop, rose and slaughtered hogs and attended to business. That evening, Yang Xiong returned. When he had finished supper and washed his feet and hands, the girl had her father speak to him.

“When my wife was dying,” Master Pan said, “my daughter promised her to have prayers said at the Grateful Retribution Monastery for women who died in childbirth. I'm going there with Clever Cloud tomorrow to see it done. I thought I'd let you know.”

Yang said to the girl: “You could have spoken to me about this directly.”

“I didn't dare. I was afraid you'd be angry.”

Nothing more was said that night, and all retired. The next day at the fifth watch Yang got up and went to sign in at the office and commence his duties. Shi Xiu also rose and set about his butcher shop business. The girl, when she awakened, made herself up seductively and put on her prettiest clothes. Carrying an incense burner, she bought some paper money and candles and summoned a sedan-chair. Shi Xiu was busy in the shop and didn't pay much attention.

After breakfast, Clever Cloud dressed up Ying'er the little maid. At mid-morning Master Pan changed his clothes. He went over to Shi Xiu.

“Can I trouble you to keep an eye on our door? I'm going with my daughter to fulfil a prayer wish at a temple. We'll be back later.”

Shi Xiu smiled. “I'll look after the house, you look after sister-in-law. Burn plenty of good incense and return soon.” he was eight-tenths sure.

Master Pan and Ying'er walked along with the sedan-chair as it proceeded to the Grateful Retribution Monastery. It was solely because of Clever Cloud that Hai the Preceptor, that sneaky shaven-pate, had adopted Master Pan as his godfather. But due to Yang Xiong's vigilant eye, he had been unable to get to her. Although he and the girl had been exchanging languishing glances ever since she became his adopted “sister,” it hadn't gone beyond that. Only the night of the memorial service did he feel he was beginning to get somewhere. The date for their meeting had been Fixed and

the tricky shaven-pate had, so to speak, sharpened his weapons and girded his loins.

When his visitors arrived he was waiting outside the mountain gate. Beside himself with joy at the sight of the sedan-chair, he came forward to greet them.

“I'm afraid we're imposing on you,” said Master Pan.

Clever Cloud, as she stepped down from her sedan-chair, said: “Thank you so much for your trouble.”

“Not at all,” replied Hai. “I've been reciting scriptures with the other monks in the Land and Sea Hall since the fifth watch without a break. We've been waiting for you, sister, so that we could burn the prayers. It will be a virtuous deed.”

He escorted the girl and her father into the hall. Incense and candles and other such paraphernalia had been prepared, and the monks were busy at their scriptures. Clever Cloud curtsied to them in greeting and paid homage to the Three Treasures—Buddha, his teaching, and their propagators. The wicked shaven-pate led her before the idol of the God of the Nether Regions, where she burned the prayers for her departed spouse. Paper money was then also burned, after which the monks were given a vegetarian meal, paid for by Clever Cloud.

Hai summoned a couple of novices to act as servants and asked Master Pan and Clever Cloud to his own apartment to dine. He lived deep within the monks' quarters. Everything was ready.

“Bring tea, brothers,” he called when they entered his rooms. Two novices served tea in snow-white cups on a vermilion colored tray. The leaves were delicate and fine.

After they finished drinking he said: “Please come and sit inside, sister.” He led the girl and her father to a small inner chamber containing a gleaming black lacquer table and, on the walls, several paintings by famous artists.

On a little stand fragrant incense was burning. Master Pan and his daughter sat at one end of the table, Hai at the other. Ying'er stood to one side.

“Ideal quarters for a man who's renounced the world,” the girl commended. “So quiet and peaceful.”

“You're making fun of me, sister. How can it compare with your fine home?”

“We've wearied you all day,” said Master Pan. “We must be getting back.”

The monk wouldn't hear of it. “Godfather, it hasn't been easy to get you here, and we're not exactly strangers,” he said. “The simple meal I'm offering has already been paid for by sister. Have some noodles before you go. Brothers, hurry with that food!”

Before the words were out of his mouth, two platters were brought in laden with rare fruits, unusual vegetable and all sorts of tidbits, and place upon the table.

“What a spread,” the girl exclaimed. “We're being too much of a nuisance.”

The monk smiled. “It doesn't amount to anything. Just a small token of my esteem.”

The novices poured the wine and Hai said: “You haven't been here for a long time, godfather. You must try this.”

Master Pan sipped. “Excellent. A very strong bouquet.”

“One of our patrons taught us how to make it. We've put to brew four or five bushels of rice. When they're ready we'll send your son-in-law a few bottles.”

“You mustn't do that.”

“I've nothing really suitable to offer. Sister, at least have a cup of this wine.”

The novices kept filling the cups. Hai also pressed Ying'er to down a few.

“That's enough for me,” said Clever Cloud finally. “I can't drink any more.”

“You come so seldom,” said Hai. “You must have one more.”

Master Pan called the sedan-chair carriers and gave them each a cup of wine.

“Don't worry about them,” said the monk. “I've already ordered that places be laid for them outside for wine and noodles. Relax and enjoy yourself, godfather. Have some more wine.”

As part of his scheme to get the girl, the wicked shaven-pate had served a wine that was particularly good and potent. It was too much for Master Pan. A few more cups and he was drunk.

“Put him to bed and let him sleep it off,” Hai instructed the two novices. They supported him to a cool, quiet room and made him comfortable.

“Have no tears, sister,” the monk urged Clever Cloud. “Another cup of wine.”

The girl was willing enough, and the wine was stirring her senses. “Why do you want me to drink so much?” she asked huskily.

In a low voice the monk replied: “Only because I think so well of you.”

“I've had enough,” the girl said.

“If you'll come into my room I'll show you Buddha's tooth.”

“That's why I'm here, to see Buddha's tooth.”

Hai took Clever Cloud upstairs to his bedroom. It was very neat and clean. The girl was half enchanted already.

“How nice. You certainly keep it spick and span.”

The monk laughed. “All that's missing is a wife.”

Clever Cloud smiled. “Why don't you choose one?”

“Where could I find such a patroness?”

“You promised to show me Buddha's tooth.”

“Send Ying'er away, and I'll take it out.”

“Go see whether father is still drunk,” Clever Cloud said to the little maid. Ying'er went downstairs to Master Pan. Hai closed the door at the head of the stairs and bolted it. The girl laughed.

“Why are you locking me in?”

Lust surged up in the wicked shaven-pate, and he threw his arms around her.

“I love you. For two years I've been racking my brains how to get you, and today you're here at last. This chance is too good to miss.”

“My husband is a hard man. Do you want to ruin me? If he ever finds out, he won't spare you.”

The monk knelt at her feet. “I don't care. Only have pity on me.”

“Naughty monk.” The girl raised her hand. “You know how to pester people. I'll box your ears.”

Hai chuckled. “Hit me all you like. I'm only afraid you'll hurt your hand.”

Enflamed with passion, Clever Cloud embraced him. “You don't think I'd really hit you?” she murmured.

He picked her up and carried her to the bed. Then he disrobed her and had his heart's desire. Only after a long time did the clouds expend their rain.

Holding the girl in his arms the monk said: “As long as you love me, though I die for it I won't care. The only flaw is that, while today you're

mine, our joy is quickly past. We can't revel all night together. Long waits between meetings is going to kill me.”

“Calm yourself,” said Clever Cloud. “I've thought of a plan. My husband is on duty at the prison twenty nights out of the month. I can buy Ying'er's co-operation. I'll have her watch at the rear gate every night. If my husband isn't home, she'll put a stand with burning incense outside. That will mean you can come. Find a friar to beat on a wooden fish at the fifth watch outside our rear gate as if summoning the faithful to prayer. Then you won't oversleep and will be able to slip away. The friar can both keep watch and see to it that you're gone before dawn.”

The monk was delighted. “Very clever. Take care of your end. I have just the man. He's a mendicant friar called Friar Hu. He'll do whatever I tell him.”

“I'd better not stay too long, or those oafs will get suspicious. I must go home at once. Don't miss our next appointment.”

The girl got up, straightened her hair, reapplied make-up, opened the stairway door and went down. She told Ying'er to awaken Master Pan, and quickly left the monks' living quarters. The sedan-chair carriers have finished their noodles and wine and were waiting at the monastery entrance. Hai the Preceptor escorted them as far as the mountain gate, where Clever Cloud bid him farewell and mounted the sedan-chair. With Master Pan and Ying'er she returned home. Of that we'll say no more. Hu had formerly worked in the monks' quarters, but he had retired and now lived in a little temple behind the monastery. He was known as Friar Hu because he rose at the fifth watch every day and beat on a wooden fish to announce the coming of dawn and urge the Buddhist faithful to pray. After daybreak he would beg alms for food. Hai summoned him to the monk's quarters, treated him to three cups of good wine, and presented him with some silver.

Hu stood up and said: “I've done nothing to merit this. How can I accept? You're always so kind to me.”

“I know what an honest fellow you are. One of these days I'm going to purchase a religious certificate for you and have you accepted into our

order. The silver is just to let you buy yourself new clothes."

Hai the Preceptor frequently instructed his monks to send Hu lunch. Or to include him when they went out to perform a religious service, so that he could also receive a small fee. Hu was very grateful.

"He's given me money again," thought Hu. "He must have some need of me. Why should I wait for him to bring it up?" And he said: "If there's anything you want, I'd be glad to do it."

"Since you're good enough to put it that way, I'll tell you the truth. Master Pan's daughter is willing to be intimate with me. She's going to have an incense stand put outside her rear gate whenever it's safe for me to call. It wouldn't be wise for me to check, but it doesn't matter if you go and have a look. Then I can risk it. Also I'd like to trouble you, when you're calling people to prayers near dawn, to come to her rear gate. If there's no one around, bang on your wooden fish and loudly summon the faithful, and I'll know I can leave."

"Nothing hard about that," said Friar Hu. He fully assented.

The next day he went begging alms at Master Pan's rear gate. Ying'er came out and said: "What are you doing here? Why don't you do your begging at the front gate?"

Hu began chanting prayers. Clever Cloud heard him and came to the rear gate. "Aren't you the friar who heralds the dawn at the fifth watch?" she asked.

"That I am. I tell folks not to sleep too much and to burn incense in the night, so as to please the gods."

The girl was delighted. She instructed Ying'er to run upstairs and get a string of coppers for the friar. When the little maid had gone, Friar Hu said: "I'm a trusted man of Teacher Hai. He's sent me to get the lay of the land."

"I know about you. Come tonight. If there's an incense stand outside, tell him."

Hu nodded. Ying'er returned with the copper coins and gave them to him. The girl went upstairs and confided in Ying'er. The little maid saw this as a chance to gain some advantage, and was glad to help.

That day Yang Xiong was on duty at the prison. Before evening, he left with his quilt. Ying'er, who had already received a small emolument, couldn't wait till nightfall, and put the incense stand out while it was still dusk. Clever Cloud hurried to the rear gate and waited. Around the first watch a man, his head bound by a kerchief, suddenly appeared.

Startled, Ying'er called out: “Who's there?”

The man did not reply. Clever Cloud reached out and yanked off the kerchief, revealing a shaven pate. She cursed him fondly.

“Wicked badly. You really know what you're about.”

Arms around each other, they went up the stairs. Ying'er took in the incense stand, bolted the gate and went to bed.

That night the two lovers were as close as glue and turpentine, sugar and honey, marrow and bone juice, fish and water, indulging merrily in licentious pleasure. Just as they were falling asleep, they heard the rap-rap-rap of a wooden fish and a voice loudly calling believers to prayer.

The monk and the girl were instantly wide awake. Hai the Preceptor threw on his clothes.

“I'm going. See you tonight.”

“Come whenever the incense stand is outside. If it's not there, stay away.”

The girl tied the bandanna round his head. Ying'er opened the rear gate and let him out.

From then on, Yang Xiong had only to be on duty at the prison, and the monk came. Master Pan was at home, but he went to bed early. Ying'er was part of the conspiracy. There remained Shi Xiu to be deceived, but by then the girl was so intoxicated with sex she didn't care. As for the monk, from

the time he began savoring the charms of Clever Cloud, his very soul seemed to have been snatched away. The moment the friar reported that the coast was clear, the monk would leave the monastery. With the collusion of Ying'er, Clever Cloud would let him in. Joyous love-play went on in this manner for more than a month.

Shi Xiu every evening, after cleaning up the butcher shop, retired to an adjacent room. The problem of Yang Xiong's wife was still troubling him, but he had no proof. He hadn't seen any sign of the monk. When he awakened at the fifth watch each morning he would sometimes jump up and peer outside. There was only a friar in the lane heralding the dawn by beating on a wooden fish and shouting a call to prayers.

Young Shi Xiu was clever. Already nine-tenths sure, he analyzed the phenomenon coolly. “This lane is a dead-end with no other families,” he mused.

“Why should a friar come here, of all places, to summon people to prayer? He's definitely up to something.”

It was then the middle of the eleventh month. One morning, when Shi Xiu woke as usual at the fifth watch, he again heard the friar beating on the wooden fish as he entered the lane. At the rear gate of the house the friar shouted: “May the gods save all living things from misery and hardship.”

Shi Xiu hopped out of bed and glued his eye to a crack in the door. A man with a kerchief binding his head slipped out of the shadows and departed with the friar, after which Ying'er closed the gate. Shi Xiu now had the whole picture.

“Brother Yang Xiong is chivalrous, but he's picked himself a wanton for a wife,” he thought angrily. “He's completely deceived, and she's playing her own little game.”

At daybreak he hung the hog carcasses in the shop and commenced serving the early morning customers. After breakfast he went out to collect some accounts. He headed for the prefectural office at noon to see Yang Xiong, and met him coming over the bridge. “What brings you here, brother?”

asked the warden. “I've been collecting accounts in the neighborhood. I thought I'd drop by.”

“I'm always so tied up on official business, I seldom have time to drink with you and relax. Let's go and sit down for a while.”

Yang Xiong took him to a tavern, chose a secluded room upstairs and told the waiter to bring good wine and some fresh tidbits. They downed three cups. Shi Xiu sat with lowered head, deep in thought. Yang Xiong was an impetuous man.

“You're unhappy about something,” he asserted. “Has anyone at home said anything to offend you?”

“No, it's not that. I'm grateful to you, brother. You've treated me like your own flesh and blood. I've something to tell you, but I don't know whether I dare.”

“How can you act as if I were a stranger? Whatever it is, speak out.”

“When you leave the house every day, your whole mind is on your official duties. You don't know what's happening behind your back. Sister-in-law isn't a good person. I've noticed signs of it several times, but I didn't dare tell you. Today it was so obvious I had to come and speak frankly.”

“I haven't got eyes in the back of my head. Who is the man?”

“When you had that memorial service at home, Hai the Preceptor, that knave of a bald-pate, was asked to officiate. I saw him and sister-in-law making eyes at each other. Two days later, she and her father went to the monastery temple to hear the prayers her mother wanted said, and they both came home smelling of wine. Lately, I've been hearing a friar beating a wooden fish and calling people to prayer in our lane. I thought there was something peculiar about the villain, and this morning I got up at the fifth watch to have a look. Sure enough, there was that scoundrelly bald-pate, a bandanna over his head, coming out of the house. A hussy like that, what do you need her for!”

Yang Xiong was furious. “The bitch. How dare she!”

“Control yourself, brother. Don't say anything tonight. Just behave as usual. Tomorrow, say that you're on duty, but come back at the third watch and knock on the front gate. The knave is sure to sneak out the back. I'll be there to catch him, and then you can dispose of him.”

“A good idea.”

“Be careful what you say tonight.”

“I'll meet you there tomorrow, then.”

The two drank a few more cups, paid the bill, went down-stairs, left the tavern and prepared to go their separate ways.

Four or five captains hailed Yang Xiong. “We've been looking all over for you, Warden. The prefect is waiting in his garden. He wants you to joust with us with staves. Come on, hurry it up.”

“The prefect wants me. I'll have to go,” Yang said to Shi Xiu. “You go back first.”

Shi Xiu returned home, put the butcher shop in order, and retired to his room.

Yang Xiong went to the rear garden of the prefect and fought a few demonstration rounds with staves. Mightily pleased, the official rewarded him with ten beakers of wine. When the gathering broke up, the others invited Yang out for more imbibing. By evening he was very drunk and had to be supported home.

Clever Cloud thanked his escort. She and Ying'er helped him up the stairs, lit a lamp and toned it on brightly. Yang sat on the bed as the little maid removed his padded shoes and his wife took off his bandanna and cap. The sight of her reaching for his head covering stirred a surge of rage within him. “Sober thoughts become drunken words,” as the old saying goes. He pointed at her and cursed:

“Baggage! Strumpet! I'm going to finish you off, come what may!”

The girl was too frightened to reply. She eased Yang down on the bed. He fell asleep the moment his head touched the pillow, but he continued muttering. “Wretch. Dirty whore. Your lover dares spit in the tiger's mouth. You.... You.... You'll pay for this!”

The girl didn't dare breathe. She stayed with him while he slept. At the fifth watch he awoke and asked for a drink of water. Clever Cloud scooped up a bowlful and gave it to him. The lamp was still burning on the table. Yang drank.

“Why haven't you undressed and come to bed?”

“You were stinking drunk. I was afraid you'd want to vomit. How could I take off my clothes? I lay at the foot of the bed all night.”

“Did I say anything?”

“You're not bad when you're drunk. You only go to sleep. But I couldn't help worrying about you during the night.”

“We haven't had brother Shi Xiu in for drinks in some time. Prepare a few things at home and I'll invite him.”

Clever Cloud did not reply. She remained seated on the step of the bed, her eyes swimming with tears. She sighed.

“I was drunk last night, wife, but I didn't give you any trouble. Why are you so upset?”

The girl put her hands over her tear-filled eyes. Yang pressed her for an answer. Clever Cloud, covering her face, pretended to weep. Yang raised her from the step to the bed, insisting that she speak.

“When my parents gave me in marriage to Wang the Scribe I hoped it would be for life. Who expected him to die so soon?” she sobbed. “Now I'm married to you, a chivalrous, bold hero, and you don't even protect me.”

“This is crazy. What do you mean I don't protect you? Who's picking on you?”

“At first I wasn't going to say anything, but I'm afraid you'll be taken in by him. I've been wanting to tell you, but I'm also afraid you'll just swallow it and not do anything.”

“What the devil are you talking about?”

“I'll tell you. But promise me you won't be too hurt. For a while, after you brought Shi Xiu home and recognized him as a blood brother, everything was all right. But later, he began dropping hints. The nights you were on duty he would say. 'Brother's not coming home again. Won't you be lonely, sleeping by yourself?' I ignored him, though he made such remarks more than once. But never mind about that. Yesterday morning, I was in the kitchen washing my neck when that rogue came up behind me. Seeing that there was no one around, he slipped his hand under and fondled my breasts. He said: Sister-in-law, are you pregnant? I pushed his hand away. I was going to yell, but I was afraid the neighbors would laugh and mock you. Then, back you come, soaked to the gills. How could I speak? 'I hate him so I could tear him apart with my teeth, and you ask sweetly after brother Shi Xiu'!”

Yang was consumed with rage. “'A tiger's picture shows its pelt but not its bones; you can know a man's face but not his heart!' That villain had the nerve to come to me with a lot of stories about Hai the Preceptor, and all the while there was nothing to it! The lout is scared. His idea was to smear you before you could speak!”

Angrily, Yang said to himself: “He's not my real brother. I'll drive him away, and that'll be the end of it.”

At daylight he went downstairs and spoke to his father-in-law. “Salt the animals that are already slaughtered. From today on, we won't do any more of this business,” he said. He smashed the counters and tables in the butcher shop.

Shi Xiu, when he was bringing out meat to hang at the front door and open the shop, saw the wreckage. A shrewd fellow, he understood at once. He smiled.

“Of course. Yang got drunk and let the cat out of the bag. His wife turned the tables by accusing me of getting fresh, and got him to close the shop. If I argue, it will only be washing Yang Xiong's dirty linen in public. I'd better retreat a step and try to think of another plan.”

He went in and collected his belongings. Yang Xiong, not wanting to embarrass him, left first. Carrying his bundle, his dagger at his waist, Shi Xiu bid Master Pan farewell.

“I've imposed on your household too long. Today, brother has closed the shop and I must go. The accounts are written out in detail. If they're so much as a penny off, may Heaven strike me dead.”

Master Pan had received his orders from his son-in-law and couldn't ask Shi Xiu to stay. He let him depart.

Shi Xiu found an inn in a nearby lane, rented a room and moved in.

“Yang Xiong is my pledged blood brother,” he thought. “If I don't clear this matter up, I may be sending him to his death. He believes his wife and blames me. At the moment, I'm in no position to argue. I must be able to prove it to him. I'll find out when he's on duty again at the prison, get up at the fourth watch, and see what the score is.”

After a couple of days at the inn, he hung around outside Yang Xiong's front gate. That evening, he saw a young guard from the prison taking off with the warden's quilt.

“That means he's on duty tonight,” Shi Xiu said to himself. “I can do a little work and see what happens.”

He returned to the inn and slept till the fourth watch. He rose, hung on his dagger, quietly left the inn, and concealed himself in the shadows of the lane near Yang Xiong's rear gate. Around the fifth watch a friar, with a

wooden fish tucked under his arm, came to the head of the lane and peered stealthily around. Shi Xiu darted behind and grabbed him, pressing his dagger against the friar's neck.

“Don't move. One sound and you're a dead man. The truth, now. What are your orders from Hai the monk?”

“Spare me, bold fellow. I'll speak.”

“If you're quick about it, I'll let you live.”

“Hai the Preceptor is mixed up with Master Pan's daughter. He comes every night. When I see incense burning at the rear gate, that's the signal to tell him he can slip it in'. At the fifth watch I beat on the wooden fish and call to prayers. That's to tell him to pull it out' .”

“Where is he now?”

“In the house, sleeping. When I bang on this fish, he'll leave.”

“Give it to me, and your clothes.”

Shi Xiu snatched the fish. As the friar was undressing, Shi Xiu drew the dagger across his throat and killed him. He put on the friar's cassock and his knee-length stockings, sheathed the dagger, and entered the lane, tapping the wooden fish.

At the sound, Hai hurriedly got out of bed, flung on his clothes, and went downstairs. Ying'er opened the rear gate and the monk darted into the lane. Shi Xiu was still loudly clobbering the fish.

“Must you make such a racket?” the monk hissed.

Shi Xiu did not reply, but let him walk to the head of the lane. Suddenly he flung the monk down and pressed him to the ground.

“If you raise your voice I'll kill you. I'll have your clothes first.”

Hai the Preceptor recognized Shi Xiu. He dared not struggle or cry out. Shi Xiu stripped him and left him without a stitch.

Silently, he pulled the dagger out of his stocking and finished the monk with three or four stabs. He placed the knife beside the body of the friar, tied the clothes of the two men into a bundle and returned with it to the inn. Softly, Shi Xiu opened the inn gate. Quietly, he closed it. Then he went to bed. Of that we'll say no more.

An old man called Master Wang who sold gruel in the district was carrying his pots on a shoulder-pole at the fifth watch and holding a lantern, followed by a little boy. They were out to catch the early mounting trade. The old man stumbled over the corpses and fell, spilling the gruel.

“Oh,” exclaimed the little boy. “There's a drunken monk lying here.”

The old man groped around. His hands felt blood. He uttered a wild cry and went into hysterics. Neighbors opened their doors and hurried out, striking lights. They saw “bloody gruel” spread all over the place and two bodies lying on the ground. The neighbors seized the old man and hauled him off to court.

And as a result: Disaster struck from the heavens, flames rose from the earth.

How did the old gruel seller get out of it? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 46
Yang Xiong Goes Wild on Jade Screen Mountain
Shi Xiu Sets Fire to the Zhu Family Inn

The neighbors brought old Master Wang before the prefect of Jizhou who had just convened court. Kneeling, they said: “This old man spilled his gruel upon the ground, and when he looked he saw two bodies lying in it. One was a monk the other a friar. Both were stark naked. Beside the friar was a knife.”

“Every day I get up at the fifth watch and sell gruel and muffins for a living,” the old fellow said. “This morning I started out a little earlier, with an iron-headed little monkey who helps me. I didn't look where I was going, and tripped and fell. All my bowls and dishes were broken. Have pity, Excellency. The sight of those two bloody corpses really gave me a fright. I roused the neighbors, but they turned me in. Please use your great wisdom to investigate and clear this up.”

The prefect had his statement taken, and directed that the local district authorities and coroners proceed with the old man and the neighbors to the scene of the crime, and there examine the bodies and report back. This was done.

“The murdered monk was Pei Ruhai, of the Grateful Retribution Monastery,” said the district officers. “The body beside him is that of Hu Dao, a friar who lived in the monastery's rear. The monk is naked, and he died from three or four stab wounds. The murder weapon was found next to Hu Dao. His throat was cut. It would appear that Hu Dao stabbed the monk to death and then, out of fear of punishment, committed suicide by cutting his own throat.”

The prefect summoned other monks from the monastery and questioned them, but none of them could throw any light on the matter. He couldn't decide. The clerk of the court offered a suggestion.

“Since the monk was naked, he must have been up to some nefarious activities with that friar, and they fought to the death. The old gruel seller was not involved. The neighbors should be released to await further instructions, after posting surety bond. Turn the bodies over to the monastery for encoffining and removal. Proclaim a judgement that the deceased killed each other, and that will be the end of it.”

“We'll do it that way,” the prefect agreed. He issued appropriate orders. Of that we'll say no more.

The murders soon became the talk of the town. Some idlers were inspired to compose this ditty:

Bestial unbridled shaven-pate

With a beauty in secret disported.

His crimes besmirched all monk's names.

In a lane his body lay

Naked in a pool of blood.

Cast it off a cliff

In deep snow

To feed the tigers!

He forgot the scriptures the abbot taught him

Mulien rescued his mother

And went to Heaven,

But this thieving baldy

Disgraced his mother in death!

Subsequently, a few young scholars got wind of the story. They took up their pens and wrote this song:

Most evil are monks

Who break the Commandments

And revel in lust

Day after day.

Strange was this fellow's behavior.

He shared the lady's pillow

and ne'er with her would part,

Mad like many monks,

Big and small.

You can see it on the streets.

Because someone talked loosely,

Death came to Hai the Preceptor.

Everyone in Jizhou was discussing the matter, and Clever Cloud was scared stiff. But she didn't dare say anything, and could only lament inwardly.

Yang Xiong was in the prefectural office when the murder of the monk and the friar was reported, and he had a pretty good idea of how it happened. “This must be the work of Shi Xiu,” he thought. “I was wrong to put the blame on him. I've some spare time today. I'll find him and get the true story.”

As he was crossing the prefectural bridge, a voice hailed him from behind. “Brother, where are you going?”

Yang turned around. There was Shi Xiu. “Brother,” said Yang, “I was just looking for you.”

“Come to my place, and we can talk.”

Shi Xiu took him to a small room in his inn. “Well, brother, was I lying?”

“Don't hold it against me. I made a stupid mistake. I got drunk and let something slip. She fooled me. She said a lot of bad things about you. I was looking for you today so that I could apologize.”

“I'm an unimportant fellow of no talent, but I'm absolutely clean and honest. I'd never do anything underhanded. I came to you because I was afraid she'd harm you. I have proof.” Shi Xiu brought out the clothing of the monk and the friar. “I stripped this from their bodies.”

Yang Xiong looked, and rage flamed in his heart. “Forgive me, brother. Tonight, if I don't pulverize that baggage, I'll burst!”

Shi Xiu laughed. “There you go again. You work in a government office. Don't you know the law? You can't kill her unless you catch her in the act. Besides, I may be just making this up, and you'll be killing an innocent person.”

“But I can't let her get away with it!”

“Listen to me, brother, and I'll tell you how to behave like a real man.”

“How is that?”

“East of town is Jade Screen Mountain, a secluded place. Tomorrow, you say to her: 'I haven't burned incense to Heaven in a long time. Let's go together.' Trick her into going with you up the mountain, and have her bring Ying'er. I'll be there, waiting. We'll have it out face to face and get the facts straight. You can then write a declaration of divorce and drop her. Isn't that a good plan?”

“There's no need. I know you're clean. She told a pack of lies.”

“But that's not all. I'd like you also to hear how she managed their assignations.”

“Since you're so wise, brother, I can't go wrong taking your advice. Tomorrow, I'll definitely bring the slut. Don't fail me.”

“If I'm not there, you'll know everything I said is false.”

Yang Xiong returned to his office. That evening when he came home he spoke only, as usual, of ordinary affairs. He rose the next morning at daybreak and said to Clever Cloud: “Last night in my dreams I met a spirit who berated me for not having kept my vow to burn incense in that Yue Temple outside of East Gate. I have time today, so I can do it. I'd like you to go with me.”

“You can go yourself. What do you need me for?”

“I made the vow when we were courting, so we must go together.”

“All right, then. We'll have a vegetarian breakfast, take warm baths, and depart.”

“I'll buy incense and paper money and hire a sedan-chair. You bathe and fix your hair. I'll be back soon. Tell Ying'er also to get ready.”

Yang Xiong went to the inn and spoke to Shi Xiu. “We leave after breakfast. Don't be late.”

“Have the sedan-chair bearers wait halfway up the slope, and you three come the rest of the distance alone. I'll be waiting in a quiet spot. Don't bring any outsiders.”

Yang then bought the paper money and candles, returned home and had breakfast. The girl had no suspicions, and made herself up neatly and attractively. Ying'er would accompany her. Bearers were waiting with the sedan-chair at the front gate.

“Please look after things here,” Yang Xiong said to his father-in-law. “I'm going with Clever Cloud to burn incense.”

“Burn plenty and come home early,” said Master Pan.

The girl mounted the sedan-chair and set out, followed by the little maid, with the warden bringing up the real. After they passed through the East Gate, Yang said to the porters in a low voice: “Go to Jade Screen Mountain. I'll pay you extra.”

In less than two watches, they were climbing the slope. Jade Screen Mountain is twenty *li* outside of Jizhou's East Gate. On it are many scattered graves. Further up you see nothing but green grass and white poplars, but it's devoid of any nunnery or monastery.

Halfway up, Yang told the bearers to halt. He opened the latch, raised the curtain and asked the girl to step out.

“What are we doing on this mountain?” Clever Cloud said.

“Just start walking. Porters, stay here. Don't come up. In a little while I'll give you wine money.”

“No problem. We'll await your orders.”

Yang led the girl and Ying'er up four or five levels. He could see Shi Xiu sitting above.

“Why haven't you brought the incense and paper money?” Clever Cloud asked.

“I've sent someone on ahead with them.”

He helped the girl to an ancient tomb site. Shi Xiu, who had placed his bundle, dagger and staff at the foot of a tree, came forward.

“My respects, sister-in-law.”

“What are you doing here, brother-in-law?” Clever Cloud hurriedly replied, startled.

“Waiting for you.”

Yang said to the girl: “You told me that he made remarks to you several times, and felt your breasts and asked if you were pregnant. There's no one here but us. You two can get the story straight.”

“Aiya! It's past. Why bother?”

Shi Xiu stared at her. “Well, sister-in-law, what do you say?”

“Have you nothing better to do than rake that up now?”

“Sister-in-law, look.” Shi Xiu opened the bundle, took out the clothes of Hai the Preceptor and the friar and flung them at her feet. “Do you recognize these?”

The girl blushed. She was unable to speak. Shi Xiu whipped out his dagger and handed it to Yang Xiong.

“Question Ying'er.”

Yang seized the maid and forced her to her knees. “The truth, little hussy,” he shouted. “How did she start her lechery in the monks' quarters? What about the signal with the incense table? And the friar beating on the wooden fish? Tell me, and I'll let you live. One lie, and I'll hack you to mincemeat.”

“It wasn't up to me, sir,” cried Ying'er. “Don't kill me! I'll tell you everything! We all had wine at the monks' quarters. Then we went upstairs to look at Buddha's tooth, but she sent me down to see whether Master Pan had recovered form his drinking. Two days later a friar came begging alms at the rear gate. She told me to get him a string of copper cash. She must have made the arrangement with him then. Whenever you were on duty at the prison, she had me put a table with incense outside the rear gate. That was the signal for the friar to tell the monk the coast was clear. Hai the Preceptor disguised himself as an ordinary man and wore a bandanna on his head. The mistress snatched it off, and I saw his shaven pate. Every morning at the fifth watch, when we heard the sound of the wooden fish, I had to open the rear gate and let him out. My mistress promised me a bracelet and new clothes. I had to obey. He came dozens of times, before he was killed. She gave me some hair ornaments and instructed me to tell you that brother-in-law had made wicked remarks and got fresh with her. I hadn't seen it myself, so I didn't dare. This is the whole truth, every word!”

“Well, brother,” said Shi Xiu, “there it is. This isn't anything I've told her to say. Now please question sister-in-law.”

The warden grasped Clever Cloud. “Bitch, the maid has confessed everything. Don't try to deny it. Tell me the truth and I'll spare your wretched life.”

“I was wrong. For the sake of what we once were to each other as husband and wife, forgive me.”

“Brother, don't let her gloss this over,” said Shi Xiu. “Make her confess in detail.”

“Speak, bitch,” Yang barked. “Be quick about it.”

Clever Cloud had no choice but to relate how she and the monk became lovers, beginning with their flirtation the night of the memorial ceremony, and all that followed.

“Why did you tell brother I tried to get fresh with you?” Shi Xiu demanded.

“When he came home drunk the other night and swore at me, he hit very close to the mark. I guessed that you knew, and had told him. Two or three nights before that, Hai instructed me what to say if this should happen. So the following morning, I had a story all prepared. Actually, you hadn't done any such thing.”

“Today, the three of us are here together and the facts are clear,” said Shi Xiu. He turned to Yang. “What to do about it is up to you.”

“Take the ornaments from that wanton's hair, brother, and remove her clothes. I'll attend to her.”

Shi Xiu did as bidden. Yang cut two ribbons from the girl's skirt and tied her to a tree. Shi Xiu also ripped off Ying'er's hair ornaments. He took up his knife.

“Why leave this little tramp? Get rid of the weeds, roots and all,” he said.

“Of course. Brother, give me that blade. I'll do it myself.”

Ying'er opened her mouth to scream. With one blow Yang cut her in two.

“Brother-in-law,” pleaded the girl at the tree, “reason with him.”

“Sister-in-law,” said Shi Xiu, “brother will deal with you personally.”

Yang Xiong advanced on Clever Cloud, pulled out her tongue and cut it off, so that she wouldn't be able to shriek. He pointed at her in a rage.

“Harlot, you had me confused. I nearly fell for your lies. You've sullied my brother's name and you're sure to kill me if you get the chance. My best bet is to strike first. What kind of heart has a bitch like you? I want to see for myself!”

He sliced her open from breast to belly, hauled out her organs, hung them on the tree, and cut her into seven parts. Then he wrapped her hair pins and ornaments into a bundle.

“Come here, brother,” Yang said to Shi Xiu. “We need a long-range plan. A treacherous male and a lecherous female have both been killed by us. The question is where can we find refuge?”

“I have a place. We'll go together.”

“Where is it?”

“You've killed a person and so have I. We'll join the band in Liangshan Marsh. Where else could we go?”

“But we don't know anyone there. Why should they accept us?”

“Everyone in the gallant fraternity has heard that Song Jiang, the Timely, Rain from Shandong, is recruiting bold fellows from all over. Who doesn't know that? You and I are both good with weapons. Of course they'll accept us.”

“It's always better to expect the worst. In that way you don't run into trouble. I'm an official. They'll be suspicious of me, and won't want us.”

Shi Xiu laughed. “Wasn't Song Jiang a county clerk? I tell you there's nothing to worry about. Do you remember those two men I went drinking

with in that tavern the day we met? Well, one of them is Dai Zong the Marvellous Traveller. The other is Yang Lin the Elegant Panther. They're both from Liangshan Marsh. Dai gave me a ten-ounce ingot of silver. I still have it in my bundle. That means I can go to him."

"I'll go home for some money, then, and we'll leave."

"You mustn't dither so, brother. If you go back into town and are arrested, how will you get away? You've those hair pins and ornaments, and I have some silver. Even if there were three of us, it would be more than enough. Why try to take more? How could I rescue you if anything went wrong? This business will be out in the open soon. We mustn't hang around. I say let's get to the other side of the mountain."

Shi Xiu shouldered his bundle and picked up his staff. Yang Xiong put the dagger in his waist sash and took his halberd. As they started to leave the ancient tomb, a man stepped out from behind a pine.

"So you kill people neath a clear blue sky and then go off to join the band in Liangshan Marsh," he cried. "I've been listening for a long time!" He dropped to his knees and kowtowed.

Yang knew him. The man's name was Shi Qian. He came from Gaotang Prefecture, before settling in Jizhou. He could fly from roof to roof, climb walls, scale fences and steal horses. He had been brought before a magistrate in Jizhou, but Yang had intervened and saved him. He was known as Flea on a Drum.

"What are you doing here?" Yang demanded.

"I haven't had any business for several days, brother Warden, and I came to poke around in some ancient tombs to see whether I could dig up anything of value. When I saw you attending to your affairs, I didn't venture to disturb you. Then I heard you say you were going to join the band in Liangshan Marsh. Around here all I can do is steal chickens and swipe dogs. I'll never amount to anything. How fine it would be if I could go with you two brothers up the mountain. Will you take me?"

“Since you're one of the bold fellows, and since they're looking for recruits in the fortress, they wouldn't object to one more,” said Shi Xiu. “Come along.”

“I know a good path,” said Flea on a Drum.

With him in the lead, the three followed a trail to the rear of the mountain and set out for Liangshan Marsh.

To return to the two sedan-chair carriers who had been waiting at the halfway point. The sun was already in the west, but Yang and the two women still hadn't come down. Their orders were to remain where they were, but they could stick it out no longer, and they plodded up the path. They saw a flock of crows around an ancient tomb. The men draw nearer. The raucously cawing birds were fighting over a piece of human intestine.

Frightened, the porters hurried back to town and told Master Pan, who took them to the prefect. The county sheriff and coroners were dispatched to the scene, where they found and inspected the bodies. They returned and gave their report.

“We discovered beside a pine tree the dismembered corpse of Pan's daughter Clever Cloud. The maidservant Ying'er lies dead before an ancient tomb. Nearby, the clothes of a woman, a monk and a friar are heaped.”

The prefect, recalling the killings of the friar and the monk Hai a few days before, carefully questioned Master Pan. The old man told how he got drunk in the monks' quarters and related the events leading to Shi Xiu's departure.

“It looks as if the girl and the monk were committing adultery, and the maid and the friar were acting as accomplices,” said the prefect. “Shi Xiu probably was outraged and killed the friar and the monk. Today, Yang doubtlessly slaughtered his wife and the maidservant. That's what must have happened. We'll capture Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu and get positive proof.”

He issued notices calling for the arrest of the fugitives and offering rewards for their apprehension. The porters were allowed to go home, pending further notification by the court. Master Pan bought coffins and had the bodies buried. Of that we'll say no more.

On leaving Jizhou, Yang Xiong, Shi Xiu and the Flea travelled steadily, resting at night and continuing the next morning. In a few days they reached the pretecture of Yunzhou. After crossing Fragrant Woods Hollow, they saw before them a high mountain. It was growing dark, and they made for an inn beside a stream. A waiter was in the process of locking up as they reached the gate.

“You must have come a long way to arrive here so late,” he said.

“More than a hundred *li*?,” Flea on a Drum replied.

The waiter let them in and gave them a room. “Would you like a fire?” he asked.

“We'll attend to it ourselves,” said the Flea.

“We've no other guests and there are two pots of boiled water on the stove. You're welcome to use them if you wish.”

“Have you any meat and wine?”

“We had some meat this morning, but people from neighboring villages bought it all. There's a jug of wine left, but nothing to go with it.”

“That'll do. And bring us five measures of rice. We'll cook it here.”

The waiter brought the rice to the Flea, who cleaned it and put it on to boil. Shi Xiu laid out his luggage. Yang gave the waiter one of the hairpins in payment for the wine and promised to settle the full account the next day. The waiter fetched the jug and opened it, and placed a few hot vegetable dished on the table. The Flea carried in a bucket of hot water for Yang and Shi Xiu to wash their hands and feet with.

The wine was poured, and the three asked the waiter to sit down and join them. They drank from four large bowls.

Shi Xiu noticed a dozen good halberds under the eaves.

“Why do you need weapons in this inn?” he asked.

“They belong to the master.”

“What sort of person is he?”

“You've been around, sir. Haven't you heard of this place? That big mountain out there is called Lone Dragon Mountain. The high cliff before it is Lone Dragon Cliff. On top of it is my master's residence. All the land around here for thirty *li* belongs to the Zhu Family Manor. Lord Zhu, my master, has three sons. They're known as the Three Zhu Warriors. This manor has five or six hundred families, all tenants, and two halberds have been issued to each family. You've staying in the Zhu Family Inn. Usually, there are several dozens of our men spending the night here. That's why we keep the halberds handy.”

“What use are they in an inn?”

“We're not far from Liangshan Marsh. Those bandits might come to rob our grain. We have to be prepared.”

“If I gave you some silver would you let me have one of the halberds?”

“Oh, no. Each halberd has its owner's mark. My master would beat me. He's very strict.”

Shi Xiu laughed. “I was only kidding. Don't get excited. Have some more wine.”

“I can't. I must go to bed. Enjoy yourselves, sir guests. Drink all you want.”

The waiter retired. Yang and Shi Xiu had another round.

“Would you like some meat?” the Flea asked them.

“Didn't the waiter say they don't have any?” Yang replied. “Where would you get meat?”

The Flea chuckled. He walked over to the stove and lifted a cooked rooster out of a pot.

“Where does that come from?” asked Yang.

“I went out in back to relieve myself and saw this rooster in a cage. I thought it would go well with your wine, so I quietly killed it by the stream, brought out a bucket of boiling water, cleaned the bird and cooked it. And here it is, ready for you two brothers to eat.”

“Still as light-fingered as ever, you villain,” said Yang.

The Flea grinned. “I haven't changed my profession.”

The three laughed. They tore the bird apart with their hands and ate it, together with the rice they had cooked.

The waiter slept only a little while. Uneasy in his mind, he got up and looked things over, front and back. On the kitchen table he saw feathers and bones. A pot on the stove was half filled with greasy water. He hurried out to the cage in the rear of the inn. It was empty. He hastened into the room where the three men were staying.

“Is that anyway to behave?” he demanded. “Why did you steal our rooster and eat it?”

“You're seeing ghosts,” scoffed the Flea. “I bought that bird on the road. Who's seen your rooster?”

“Where is it, then?”

“Dragged off by a wild cat, eaten by a weasel, pounced on by a hawk — who knows?”

“That bird was in the cage just a short while ago. If you didn't steal it, who did?”

“Don't wrangle,” said Shi Xiu. “We'll pay you whatever it's worth.”

“It heralds the dawn. Our inn can't do without it. Even ten ounces of silver wouldn't be money enough. Give me back our bird.”

“Who are you trying to extort?” Shi Xiu said angrily. “Just for that I won't give you a penny. What are you going to do about it?”

The waiter laughed. “Regular fire-eaters, aren't you? Our inn is different. We'll drag you up to the manor and try you for being bandits from Liangshan Marsh!”

“Suppose we were? Do you think you could capture us and claim the reward?” Shi Xiu demanded.

Yang Xiong was also very irate. “With the best of intentions, we were going to give you some money. Now we won't,” he said, “let's see you take us!”

“Thieves, thieves,” shouted the waiter.

Four or five big bruisers, stripped to the waist, charged into the room and made for Yang and Shi Xiu. With one blow of the fist each, Shi Xiu knocked them flat The waiter opened his mouth to yell. The Flea slapped him so hard that his face swelled up and he couldn't utter a sound. The bruisers fled through the rear gate.

“Those louts must be going for help,” said Yang. “Let's finish eating, quickly, and get out of here.”

The three ate their fill, shouldered their packs, put on comfortable hemp sandals, attached their daggers, and helped themselves to one halberd apiece from the weapons rack.

“A henchman is a henchman,” said Shi Xiu. “We can't let any of them off.”

He lit a bundle of straw in the stove and set fire to all sides of the inn. Fanned by the wind, the thatched roofs burst into blaze, great tongues of flame leaping into the sky. The three men struck out along the highway.

When they had marched for about two watches, they saw before and behind them innumerable torches. Nearly two hundred men, shouting and yelling, were closing in.

“Keep calm,” said Shi Xiu. “We'll take to the small paths.”

“No,” said Yang Xiong. “Let them come. We'll kill them singly or in pairs. At daybreak, we'll go on.”

Before the words were out of his mouth, they were attacked from four sides. Yang was in the lead, Shi Xiu covered the rear, the Flea defended the middle. With halberds they fought the charging vassals, who came at them with staves and spears. The pursuers didn't know what they were letting themselves in for. Yang, wielding his halberd, promptly felled half a dozen. The assault group fled pell-mell. Shi Xiu gave chase and hacked down half a dozen more.

When the other vassals saw this carnage, they decided they wanted to live, and that this was not a very healthy atmosphere. They turned and ran, with the three in hot pursuit. More shouting rose, and two long hooked poles snaked out of the dry grass, fastened onto the Flea and dragged him into the underbrush. Shi Xiu whirled to go to his rescue. From behind, another two hooked poles shot out. The sharp-eyed Yang Xiong swiftly knocked them aside with his halberd and stabbed into the thicket. There were cries, and the ambushers hastily departed. The two saw them pulling away the Flea, but they had no heart for a fight in the depths of the thicket, and could only let him go.

They finally found a path and went on. The glow of the distant torches provided them with illumination, since the path was bare of trees or shrubbery, and they proceeded along it in an easterly direction.

The vassals, after searching for them in vain, collected their wounded. They brought the Flea, his hands tied behind his back, to the Zhu Family Manor.

Yang and Shi Xiu were still walking at daylight. A village tavern lay ahead.

“Let's buy some wine and food, brother, and ask directions,” Shi Xiu suggested.

They entered the tavern, leaned their halberds against the wall, sat down, and ordered food and drink. The waiter served a few vegetable dishes and heated some wine. They were about to start, when a big man came in. His face was broad, his eyes bright, his ears large, his appearance rough and ugly. He wore a tea-brown robe, a head kerchief decorated with swastikas, a white silk waist sash, and oiled leather boots.

“His Excellency wants those loads delivered to the manor right away,” he shouted.

The tavern host replied hastily: “Everything's ready. We'll send them over very soon.”

The man turned to go. “Hurry it up,” he said. He was passing Yang Xiong's and Shi Xiu's table on the way to the door. Yang recognized him.

“Young man, what are you doing here?” Yang called. “Won't you take a look at me?”

The big fellow stared. Recognition grew in his eyes. “What are you doing here, benefactor?” he exclaimed. He dropped to his knees and kowtowed.

And because Yang encountered this man, the pledge of alliance between the three villages became as naught, and the roar of assembled tigers brought down disaster.

Who was this man whom Yang and Shi Xiu had met? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 47
Heaven Soaring Eagle Writes Two Letters Requesting Reprieve
Song Jiang's First Attack on the Zhu Family Manor

Yang Xiong raised the man to his feet and called Shi Xiu over.

“Who is this brother?” asked Shi Xiu.

“Du Xing is his name. He's from the prefecture of Zhongshan. Because of his crude features everyone calls him Demon Face. Last year he came to Jizhou as a trader. He killed one of the other merchants in his company in a fight, and was brought before the prefect and committed to my prison. I talked with him and found him very knowledgeable about hand-to-hand fighting and jousting with staves. So I used my influence and got him off. I never expected to meet him in this place.”

“Are you here on official business, benefactor?” asked Du Xing.

Yang leaned close to his ear. “I killed a man in Jizhou and want to join the band in Liangshan Marsh. We spent last night at the Zhu Family Inn. Shi Qian, who's travelling with us, stole their rooster and we ate it, and the waiter raised a fuss. We got angry and set fire to the inn and ran away in the night. Pursuers caught up with us and we two knocked down several, but a couple of hooked poles reached out of the thicket and dragged Shi Qian away. We barged around until we came here. We were just about to ask for directions when you unexpectedly arrived brother.”

“Don't let it worry you, benefactor. I'll get them to return Shi Qian to you.”

“Sit down and have a drink with us.”

The three men sat and drank. Du Xing said: “Since leaving Jiizhou I benefited greatly from your kindness. Here, a big official took a liking to me and appointed me his steward. Every day all the thousand and one things in his household are in my hands. He trusts me completely. That's why I have no thought of going home.”

“Who is this big official?”

“Before Lone Dragon Mountain are three cliffs, and on each of these is a village. Zhu Family Village is in the center, Hu Family Village is to the west, Li Family Village is to the east. These three villages and their manors have a total of nearly twenty thousand fighting men. Zhu Family Manor is the strongest. It is headed by Lord Zhu, who has three sons, known as the

Three Warriors. The eldest is called Dragon, the second is called Tiger, the third is called Tiger Cub. They have an arms instructor, Luan Tingyu, who's known as the Iron Staff. Ten thousand men are no match for him. The manor has nearly two thousand fearless vassals.

“Hu Family Manor, to the west, is headed by Squire Hu. He has a son named Hu Cheng, the Flying Tiger, who is a powerful fighter. He also has a daughter, an extremely courageous girl, known as Ten Feet of Steel because of the two long gleaming swords she wields. She's an excellent horsewoman.

“My master heads the eastern manor. His name is Li Ying, and he's skilled with a steel-flecked iron lance. On his back he carries five concealed throwing knives. He can hit a man at a hundred paces, quicker than you can blink.

“The three villages have a solemn pact. If one is attacked by evildoers, the others must go to its rescue. They're worried that bold fellows from Liangshan Marsh will raid them for grain, so they've prepared to defend themselves, together. I will take you to meet my master, and we'll request him to write a letter asking for Shi Qian's release.”

“Your master Li Ying, isn't he the one known in the gallant fraternity as Heaven Soaring Eagle?” queried Yang Xiong.

“The very same.”

Shi Xiu said: “I've heard that Li Ying of Lone Dragon Mountain is a Chivalrous fellow. So this is where he's from. They say he's a remarkable fighter, a real man. We'll go to him.”

Yang asked the waiter for the bill, but Du Xing insisted on paying. The three left the tavern. Du led them to the Li Family Manor. It was a huge affair. Fronting on a river cove, it was surrounded by whitewashed walls beside which grew hundreds of willows each thicker than two arms could embrace. They crossed a lowered drawbridge to the manor gates and entered. Twenty racks on either side of the outer chamber of the main hall were filled with gleaming weapons.

“Please wait here a moment, brothers,” said Du. “I will inform the master that you've come.”

Du Xing went inside. Shortly afterwards he emerged with Li Ying. Du brought Yang and Shi into the reception chamber, where they kowtowed. Li Ying returned the courtesy and invited them to be seated. The two visitors and their host politely argued over who should sit where, but finally took their places. Li called for wine.

Again the two visitors kowtowed. They said: “We beseech you, sir, to send a letter to the Zhu Family Manor, asking them to spare the life of Shi Qian. We shall never forget your kindness, now or in the hereafter.”

Li Ying summoned the family tutor, dictated a letter, and affixed his seal. He directed his assistant steward to deliver it at once on a fast horse and return with the captive. The man took the missive, mounted, and left. Yang and Shi expressed their thanks.

“You needn't worry,” said Li Ying. “When they get my letter, they'll release him.”

The two thanked him again. “Please come with me to the rear chamber,” said their host. “We can have a few drinks while we're waiting.”

They went with him and found that breakfast had been prepared. When they finished eating, tea was served. Li asked them some questions about jousting with spears. Their replies showed they knew what they were talking about, and Li was very pleased.

At mid-morning the assistant steward returned. Li Ying, in the rear chamber, asked: “Where is the man you were sent to fetch?”

“I sent the letter in,” said the messenger, “confident they would let him go. Instead, the three sons came out and were quite unpleasant. They wouldn't answer your letter, and they wouldn't release the man. They're determined to turn him over to the prefectural authorities.”

Li Ying was surprised. “Our three villages have a life-and-death alliance. They ought to respect my letter. How can they behave like that? You must have spoken rudely, to provoke such a response.” He turned to Du Xing. “Steward, you'd better go yourself. See Lord Zhu personally, and explain the circumstances.”

“I will, sir. But I suggest you write a missive in your own hand. Then, they'll have to let him go.”

“Very well,” said Li Ying. On a flowery sheet of paper he wrote a letter, added his personal seal to the envelope and handed it to Du Xing.

A fast horse was led out from the stable, already saddled and bridled. Whip in hand, Du walked through the manor gates, mounted, struck the animal a sharp blow, and galloped off towards the Zhu Family Manor.

“Don't worry,” Li Ying said to his two callers. “When they receive this personal letter, they're sure to let him go quickly.”

Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu profusely thanked the squire. He drank wine with them, while waiting in the rear chamber.

Daylight was beginning to fade, and still Du Xing hadn't returned. Li Ying became concerned, and he sent men down the road to meet him. A vassal soon came in and reported:

“Steward Du is approaching.”

“Who else is with him?”

“He's galloping back alone.”

Li Ying shook his head in wonderment. “Very strange. He isn't usually so dilatory. Why is he slow today?”

He left the hall, followed by Yang and Shi. Du had dismounted and was just entering the manor gates. His face was tight with rage and his teeth were bared. For several minutes he was unable to speak.

“Tell us in detail,” said Li Ying. “What happened?”

Du Xing controlled himself with an effort. “I carried your letter to their third big gate, and found, by coincidence, the three sons sitting there. I hailed them courteously. 'What do you want?' Tiger Cub snarled. I bowed and said: 'My master has sent me with this letter. I respectfully submit it.' His face darkened, and he replied: 'How can your master be SO ignorant? The wretch he sent this morning brought a letter asking us for that Liangshan Marsh bandit Shi Qian. We're going to take him before the prefect. Why have you come again?' I said: 'Shi Qian isn't a member of the Liangshan Marsh band. He's a merchant from Jizhou who's come to see my master. There was a misunderstanding and he burned down your inn. My master undertakes to rebuild it. As a courtesy to us, please be lenient and forgive him.' The three brothers shouted: 'We're not going to let him go.' I said: 'Please, sirs, at least read the letter my master has written.' Tiger Cub took it and, without opening it, tore it to shreds. He yelled for his men to throw me out of the manor. He and Tiger said: 'Don't make your betters angry, or we'll' —I wasn't going to tell you this, but those animals really were too crude—'we'll nab that Li Ying and take him up before the court as a Liangshan Marsh bandit as well!' They yelled for their vassals to lay hands on me, but I jumped on my horse and raced away. I was burning with rage all the way home. What scoundrels! After all these years of close alliance, to behave so churlishly!”

When Li Ying heard this, his fury burst out of control and spurted sky-high. “Vassals,” he roared, “bring me my horse!”

“Calm yourself, sir,” Yang and Shi pleaded. “Don't spoil the local harmony for our sakes.”

But Li would not listen. He put on golden armor with animal-faced discs, chest and back, and over that a voluminous red cape. Behind him, he affixed five throwing knives. He took his steel-flecked spear, donned his phoenix-winged helmet, strode out of the manor gates, and selected three hundred of his toughest vassals. Du Xing also put on armor, got a lance, and mounted. With him were twenty other horsemen. Yang and Shi girded up their robes. Halberds at the ready, they followed Li Ying's horse as the company advanced rapidly on the Zhu Family Manor.

The sun was linking in the western hills when they reached Lone Dragon Cliff.

They spread out in battle formation. The manor was strategically well situated upon a cliff and surrounded by a broad stream. It was enclosed by three sets of walls, one within the other, each twenty feet high and built of sturdy rock. The front and rear gates of the manor were equipped with drawbridges. Within the walls were huts bristling with weapons. In the gate-house atop the wall were war drums and gongs.

Li Ying reined in his horse in front of the manor. “Three sons of the Zhu Family,” he shouted. “How dare you slander me!”

The manor gates opened and out rode fifty or sixty horsemen. In the lead, astride a charcoal roan steed, was Tiger Cub, third son of Lord Zhu. Li Ying shook his finger at the youth.

“The smell of milk hasn't gone from your lips. You've still got baby hair on your head. Your father has a life-and-death alliance with me. We've sworn to defend our villages jointly. When your family is in difficulty and needs men, we give them at once. When it needs materials, we never stint. Today, in good faith, I sent you two letters. Why did you tear them up? Insult me? Why have you committed this outrage?”

“Yes, we have a pact with you to defend our mutual interests,” Tiger Cub retorted, “and to grab any bandits from Liangshan Marsh and destroy their mountain lair. How is it you're colluding with them? Are you planning to become a rebel too?”

“Who says Shi Qian is from Liangshan Marsh? You're slandering an innocent man. That's criminal.”

“He's already confessed. Your lies aren't any use. They can't conceal the facts. Now, get out of here. If you don't, we'll grab you for a bandit and turn you in as well.”

Furious, Li Ying whipped up his horse and charged at Tiger Cub with levelled lance. The youth spurred his own mount forward, and the two

fought before Lone Dragon Cliff. To and fro, up and down, nearly eighty rounds they battled. Tiger Cub realized he couldn't vanquish his adversary. He turned his horse and ran. Li Ying gave chase. Tiger Cub rested his lance athwart his animal's neck, fitted an arrow to his bow and drew it to the full. Twisting in the saddle, he aimed and let fly. Li Ying dodged, but the arrow struck him in the shoulder, and he tumbled to the ground. Tiger Cub wheeled his mount and started back, intending to seize him.

Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu uttered a great shout and dashed in the path of the youth's horse with raised halberds. Tiger Cub knew he was no match for them, and again he hurriedly turned his mount. Yang jabbed the horse in the withers, and it reared in pain, nearly unseating its rider. Zhu Family archers, who had followed after the horsemen, began whizzing arrows at Yang and Shi. They had no armor, and had to withdraw. By then, Du Xing had lifted Li Ying to his steed and ridden away. Yang and Shi followed in the wake of the retreating Li Family vassals. The Zhu Family forces pursued them for two or three *li*. But daylight was fading, and they returned to their manor.

Holding Li Ying, Du Xing rode home. At the gate he dismounted and helped his master into the rear chamber. The women of the household came in to attend him. They extracted the arrow, removed his armor, and applied a poultice to the wound.

That night, the men conferred. Yang and Shi said to Du Xing: “That rogue has insulted Li Ying. He's wounded him with an arrow and we haven't rescued Shi Qian. It's all our fault for having involved your master. We two will go to Mount Liangshan and entreat Chao and Song and the other leaders to come and avenge him and rescue Shi Qian.” They thanked Li Ying and requested leave to depart.

“It's not that I didn't try, but the odds were too great,” said Li Ying. “Please forgive me.” He directed Du Xing to present Yang and Shi with gold and silver. They didn't want to accept, but Li Ying said: “We're all in the gallant fraternity. No need for courtesy.”

Only then did they take his gifts. They kowtowed and bid him farewell. Du Xing saw them to the edge of the village and pointed out the main road, then returned to the Li Family Manor. Of that we'll say no more.

Yang and Shi pushed on towards Liangshan Marsh. They saw in the distance a newly built tavern, its wine pennant fluttering in the breeze. On arrival, they ordered drinks and asked directions. Actually, this tavern was a lookout place recently added by the men on Mount Liangshan. Shi Yong was in charge. He overheard them asking the waiter how to get to the fortress, and could see that they were no ordinary men. He walked over to their table.

“Where are you two gentlemen from? Why do you want to go up the mountain?” he queried.

“We're from Jizhou,” Yang Xiong replied.

Shi Yong suddenly remembered. “Then you must be Shi Xiu.”

“No, I'm Yang Xiong. This is Shi Xiu. How do you know his name, brother?”

“We haven't met. But not long ago brother Dai Zong stopped here on his way back from Jizhou and told me a lot about him. Today, you two want to go up the mountain. That's very good news.”

The three exchanged courtesies, and Yang and Shi told Shi Yong of their encounter with the Zhu Family. Shi Yong directed the waiter to serve them the best wine. He opened the window of the pavilion over-looking the water, bent his bow, and shot a whistling arrow. Instantly, a bandit rowed a boat over from the reeds in the cove opposite. Shi Yong escorted the two on board and delivered them to Duck's Bill Shore. He had sent a man ahead to report, and now Dai Zong and Yang Lin came down the mountain to welcome them. After courtesies were exchanged, they went together to the stronghold.

When the leaders were informed that more bold fellows had arrived, they convened a meeting in the hall and sat in their chairs of rank. Dai Zong and Yang Lin led in Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu and presented them to Chao and Song and the other leaders. Chao questioned them carefully on their backgrounds. The two told of their skill with arms and of their desire to join the band. The leaders were very pleased, and offered them seats.

After a time Yang Xiong said: “There is a man named Shi Qian who also wants to join. But unfortunately he stole a rooster that heralded the dawn at the Zhu Family Inn and we got into a row. Shi Xiu burned the place down and Shi Qian was captured. Li Ying sent two letters requesting his release, but the three sons of the Zhu Family have refused to let him go. They've vowed to take all the gallants in this stronghold, and they've cursed and reviled you in every way. Those varlets have no sense of fitness whatsoever.”

If he hadn't told this, nothing would have happened. But he did, and Chao Gai flew into a rage.

“Children,” he shouted to the assembled bandits, “take these two out, cut off their heads, and report back.”

Song Jiang hastily intervened. “Calm yourself, brother. These two warriors have come a long distance, and with one thought in mind—to help us. Why do you want them executed?”

“Ever since our bold fellows took over here from Wang Lun, we've always placed chivalry and virtuous behavior towards the people first. Brother after brother has gone down the mountain, but none of them has injured our prestige. All our brothers, new or old, are honorable and chivalrous. These rogues, in the name of the gallants of Liangshan Marsh, stole a rooster and ate it, shaming us by association. They must be decapitated, and their heads displayed at the scene of the crime as a warning. I will personally lead our forces down and purge the Zhu Family Village so that our reputation for valor will not be lost. Children, off with their heads!”

“Wait,” said Song Jiang. “Didn't you hear what these two brothers just said? Shi Qian the Flea on a Drum has always been light fingered. It was his behavior that provoked the Zhu Family. In what way have these two brothers shamed our stronghold? I've heard many people say that the Zhu Family Manor is hostile to us. Cool down, brother. We have many men and horses, but we're short of money and grain. Although we're not looking for trouble with the Zhu's, since they've started the provocation, this is a good chance to go down and nab them. When we defeat the manor, we'll capture enough grain to last us four or five years. We're not seeking an excuse to

harm them, but those oafs are really much too rude. You are the highest leader here, brother. Why sally forth on minor matters? I have no talent, but with a contingent of men and horses, and the help of some of our brothers, I'd like to attack the Zhu Family Manor. If we don't wipe it out, we won't return. For one thing, only vengeance will restore our prestige. Secondly, we must pay those pipsqueaks for their insults. Thirdly, we'll get a lot of grain for the use of our fortress. And fourthly, we can ask Li Ying to come up and join our band."

"A very good idea," said Wu Yong. "We in the fortress shouldn't destroy men who are like our own hands."

"I'd rather you decapitated me than hurt one of our brothers," said Dai Zong.

At the urging of all the leaders, Chao Gai finally pardoned Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu. They thanked him and kowtowed.

"Don't be angry," Song Jiang said to them soothingly. "It's a rule of our stronghold, and we must obey. Even I could be decapitated if I violated it. I could expect no forgiveness. Pei Xuan, the Ironclad Virtue, has recently been made provost marshal, and rules regarding rewards and punishments have been promulgated. Don't hold it against us, please."

Chao asked Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu to take seats after Yang Lin, and all the rank and file bandits were summoned to join in congratulating the new chieftains. Cows and horses were slaughtered and a celebration feast was laid. Living quarters were allocated to Yang and Shi, and ten bandits were appointed to each as attendants.

The banquet ended that evening, and the next day they feasted again. Then the leaders conferred. Song Jiang directed Ironclad Virtue to compile a list of men to go down the mountain, and he invited the other leaders to accompany him in a raid on the Zhu Family Manor. He was determined to demolish it. It was agreed that Wu Yong, Liu Tang, the three Ruan brothers, Lu Fang and Guo Sheng would remain to hold the fortress, in addition to Chao Gai. Those guarding the shore, the gates and the taverns would also remain at their posts. Newly arrived Meng Kang, who had been appointed

boat builder, would replace Ma Lin as the supervisor of war vessels. A written announcement was drawn stating that the leaders participating in the raid on the Zhu Family Manor were divided into two units. The first included Song Jiang, and would head a body of three thousand foot soldiers and three hundred cavalry. When armored and equipped, this would go first, as the van.

The second unit would include Lin Chong, and would also head three thousand foot soldiers and three hundred cavalry. This body would follow, as reinforcements.

Song Wan and Zhang Tianshou would continue holding the small forts at the Shore of Golden Sands and Duck's Bill Shore, respectively, and be responsible for supplying the attackers with grain and fodder. Chao Gai saw the raiders off and returned to the stronghold. Song Jiang's party made straight for the Zhu Family Manor. Nothing untoward happened on the way, and they soon were approaching Lone Dragon Mountain. When they were about a *li* or so away, they pitched camp. Song Jiang's tent was in the middle, and he sat there conferring with Hua Rong.

“I hear the roads to the manor are very tricky,” he said, “and that it's difficult to move up on them with soldiers. I'll send a couple of men to scout out which paths are best. Then we can advance and engage the foe.”

“I've been idle for a long time, brother,” said Li Kui. “I haven't killed a single person. Let me go in first.”

“Not you, brother,” said Song Jiang. “If we needed a shock assault, I'd send you. But this is careful, delicate work. You're not suitable.”

Li Kui laughed. “That friggin manor. Why trouble yourself? I'll take two or three hundred of the lads, and we'll carve our way in and cut all the wretches down. What do you need scouts for?”

“You're talking rot. Get out of here, and don't come till I call you.”

Li Kui left, muttering to himself: “All that fuss about swatting a few flies.”

Song Jiang summoned Shi Xiu and said: “You've been here before. I'd like you and Yang Lin to scout around.”

“Since you've come with a large force, they're of course on their guard at the manor. How should we disguise ourselves?”

“I'll dress up as an exorcist,” said Yang Lin, “and conceal a knife in my clothes. I'll carry a prayer wheel as I walk along. The moment you hear the sound of it, come up to me and stay close.”

“I sold fuel in Jizhou,” said Shi Xiu. “I'll tote a load as if I was selling again. I also will have a concealed weapon. In an emergency I can use the carrying-pole as well.”

“Good. We'll work out the details, and prepare tonight. We'll get up at the fifth watch and go.”

The next morning, Shi Xiu left first with his load of fuel. Before he had gone twenty *li,* he encountered a complicated maze of paths which seemed to go round in circles through thick groves of trees. He couldn't figure them out. Shi Xiu set down his load. Behind, he heard the hum of an approaching prayer wheel. Yang Lin, a broken straw hat on his head, wearing an old priest's robe and twirling a prayer wheel, was coming towards him with stately tread. No one else was in sight, so Shi Xiu spoke to him:

“These paths all twist and turn. I can't remember which was the one I took with Li Ting the other day. It was nearly dark and they knew the way and travelled fast. I wasn't able to get a good look.”

“Stay off the paths, then, and stick to the main road.”

Shi Xiu shouldered his load again and continued on. He saw a village ahead, and several taverns and butcher shops. He walked up to the gate of one of the taverns. He noticed that racks of weapons stood in front of every shop, and that all the men in them wore golden vests with the word “Zhu” emblazoned on the backs.

People on the streets were similarly dressed. Shi Xiu respectfully hailed the old man who was passing by and bowed.

“May I ask you about a local custom, grandpa? Why are there weapons at every door?”

“Where are you from, stranger? If you don't know, you'd better leave quickly.”

“I'm a date-seller from Shandong. I've lost my capital and can't go home. Now I sell fuel. I'm not familiar with you local ways.”

“Go quickly. Get out of sight. There's going to be a big battle here soon.”

“How can that be, a nice place like this?”

“You really don't know? Well, I'll tell you. This is called Zhu Family Village. It's ruled by Lord Zhu, whose manor is up on that cliff. He's offended the bold fellows in Liangshan Marsh, and they've come with men and horses to kill us all. But the paths to our village are too complicated, and they're camped outside. The manor has directed every able-bodied young man to get ready. The moment the order comes, they're to rush to the said of our fighters.”

“How many people have you here in this village, grandpa?”

“Nearly twenty thousand. And we can count on help from the villages to our east and west. The eastern one is ruled by Heaven Soaring Eagle Li Ying. The western one belongs to Squire Hu. He has a daughter called Ten Feet of Steel who's a terror with weapons.”

“In that case, you've nothing to fear from Liangshan Marsh!”

“That's right. If we ourselves had just arrived, we too could be easily captured.”

“What do you mean, grandpa?”

“We have a jingle that goes:

A fine Zhu Family Village,

Its paths twist round about,

Getting in is easy,

But just try getting out!”

Shi Xiu began to weep. He flopped to the ground and kowtowed.

“I'm a poor trader who lost his capital on the road and can't go home, and now I'm selling fuel,” he cried. “This is awful. I've landed in the middle of a battle and can't escape. Pity me, grandpa. I'll give you this load of fuel, only show me the way out!”

“I don't want your fuel for nothing. I'll buy it from you. Come with me. I'll treat you to some food and wine.”

Shi Xiu thanked him, shouldered his load, and went with the old man to his house. His host poured out two bowls of white wine, filled another with rice gruel, and set them before him. Again Shi Xiu expressed his thanks.

“Grandpa,” he begged, “tell me how to get out of here.”

“You just turn whenever you reach a white poplar. Take the path that starts from there, whether it be narrow or broad. Any other path leads to a dead end. No other tree will do. If you take a wrong path, you'll never get out, whether you go left or right. The dead-end trails are strewn with hidden bamboo spikes and iron prongs. You're liable to step on them, and you're sure to be captured. You wouldn't have a chance of getting away.”

The young man kowtowed and thanked him. “What is your name, grandpa?”

“Most people in this village have the surname of Zhu. Only my family is named Zhongli. We've always been here.”

“I've had enough food and wine. Some day I'll repay you well.”

While they were talking, they heard a clamor outside. A voice shouted: “We've caught a spy.” Startled, Shi Xiu and the old man hurried into the courtyard. They saw seventy or eighty soldiers escorting a man with his hands tied behind his back. Shi Xiu recognized Yang Lin. He had been stripped naked. Shi Xiu groaned inwardly.

“Who is that?” he made a pretense of asking the old man. “Why is he bound?”

“Didn't you hear them say he's a spy sent by Song Jiang?”

“How was he caught?”

“He's a bold rascal. He came alone, disguised as an exorcist priest, barging into the village. Since he didn't know the way, he could only follow the main road. Left or right would have taken him into dead ends. He'd never heard the secret of the white poplars. Someone saw him wandering off on a wrong turning, and thought he looked suspicious. So he reported to the manor, and they sent men to nab him. The rogue pulled a knife and wounded four or five of them. But they were too many, and he was overpowered. Now he's been recognized as a robber. They say he's called Yang Lin the Elegant Panther.”

Down the road a voice exclaimed: “The Third Son of the manor has come on patrol.”

Through a crack in the courtyard wall Shi Xiu saw twenty foot soldiers with red-tasseled spears, followed by five mounted men, all with bows and arrows. Behind, another four or five riders on white horses were gathered protectively around a young warrior on a snow-white steed. In full armor, he carried a bow and arrows, and gripped a lance. Shi Xiu recognized him, but feigned ignorance.

“Who is that young gentleman passing by?”

“Lord Zhu's third son, Tiger Cub. He's engaged to Ten Feet of Steel of the Hu Family Manor, west of here. Of the three sons, he's the most terrific fighter.”

Shi Xiu again thanked the old man and said: “Please point out which road I should take.”

“It's late already, and a battle may be raging ahead. You'll be throwing your life away.”

“Save me, grandpa, I beg you.”

“Spend the night here. Tomorrow, if things are quiet, you can leave.”

Shi Xiu thanked him, and remained. Four or five mounted men were going from door to door and exhorting the populace: “If you see a red signal lantern tonight, use might and main to catch the Mount Liangshan bandits and claim the reward.”

When they had gone, Shi Xiu asked: “Who was that official with them?”

“He's our local sheriff. Tonight they're planning to capture Song Jiang.”

Shi Xiu gave this some thought. Then he borrowed a torch, said good night, and retired to sleep in a thatched hut in the rear.

Song Jiang and his forces were encamped outside the village. Neither Shi Xiu nor Yang Lin had returned. Ou Peng was sent to the village entrance to check. After a while he reported back.

“People are saying they've caught a spy. Those paths are very complicated. I didn't dare to go further in.”

Song Jiang grew angry. “I can't wait for a report any longer. Now the word is they've caught a spy. That means our two brothers have been trapped.

We'll attack tonight, regardless. We'll fight our way in and rescue them. How do the rest of you feel about it?” he asked the other leaders.

“I'll go first,” said Li Kui. “Just to see what it's like.”

Song Jiang ordered all men to arm themselves and put on their gear. Li Kui and Yang Xiong would be the vanguard. Li Jun would command the rear. Mu Hong would take the left flank, Huang Xin the right. Song Jiang, Hua Rong and Ou Peng would lead the central contingent.

Amid waving flags, pounding drums and braying gongs, the raiders, shouting and brandishing swords and axes, marched rapidly on the Zhu Family Manor.

It was dusk when they reached Lone Dragon Cliff. Song Jiang urged the forward contingent to attack the manor. Li Kui, stripped to the buff and brandishing two steel battle-axes, rushed ahead like a streak of fire. But at the manor, he found the drawbridge raised and not a light showing anywhere. Li Kui was going to jump into the moat and swim across, but Yang Xiong stopped him.

“No, don't. If they've closed the manor gates, they must have some scheme. Wait till brother Song Jiang arrives, then we'll decide what to do.”

To Li Kui this was unbearable. He smote his battle-axes and shouted up the cliff: “Lord Zhu, you friggin crook, come out! Your master Black Whirlwind is here, waiting!”

There was no response from the manor.

Song Jiang, followed by Yang, arrived with his men. The manor was quiet. He reined in his horse and looked. Not a weapon or a soldier was in sight. Warily, he thought: “I'm wrong. The Heavenly Books say clearly: 'Avoid rashness in the face of the enemy.' I didn't foresee this. I thought only of rescuing our two brothers, and moved my troops up through the night. I didn't expect that when I got in deep, right up to their manor, that the foe's army wouldn't show. They must be up to something.”

He ordered his three contingents to withdraw at once. Li Kui objected.

“We've come this far. You mustn't retreat,” he cried. “You and I will fight our way in. All of you, follow me!”

Before the words were out of his mouth, the manor knew about it. A signal rocket arched through the sky. On the cliff thousands of torches suddenly flared. Arrows showered down from the gate-house above the wall. Song Jiang hastily withdrew his forces along the road on which it had come. The rear guard under Li Jun set up a shout.

“We're cut off! They've laid an ambush!”

Song Jiang directed his men to seek other roads. Li Kui, flourishing his axes, dashed about, looking for adversaries, but he couldn't find a single enemy soldier. Another signal rocket soared from the cliff. Before the sound of it had died away, thunderous shouts rang from all sides. Pop-eyed and slackmouthed with astonishment, Song Jiang was completely at a loss. In spite of his civil and military skills he had fallen into the net.

Truly, a plan for snaring tigers and dragons was being used to catch a heaven-startling, earth-shaking man.

How did Song Jiang and the other leaders escape? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 48
Ten Feet of Steel Alone Captures Stumpy Tiger Wang
Song Jiang's Second Attack on the Zhu Family Manor

Song Jiang, on his horse, gazed around. Enemy troops were lying in wait in every direction. He ordered his men to fight their way towards the main road. Soon, he again heard cries of consternation. When he asked the cause, the men said:

“These paths all wind in circles. No matter how we turn, we keep coming back here.”

“Advance to where you see torches and people's dwellings,” he said.

Before long, the vanguard once more set up a cry. “We can't head for the torches. The paths are strewn with bamboo spikes and iron barbs and blocked with sharp-pronged branches like deer antlers.”

Song Jiang groaned. “Heaven has forsaken me.”

Just then there was a stir in the left flank contingent under Mu Hong. A messenger reported: “Shi Xiu is here.” In a moment, Shi Xiu, twirling his blade, rushed up to Song Jiang's horse.

“Don't be alarmed, brother,” he said. “I know how to travel these paths. Pass the word, quietly: Take any path, whether narrow or broad, which starts at a white poplar.”

Song Jiang issued the appropriate order. When they had proceeded another five or six *li*, he saw ahead a large concentration of enemy men and horses. He shouted for Shi Xiu and asked: “Why are there so many of those rogues up there, brother?”

“They use a lantern as an assembly signal.”

Hua Rong peered from his saddle. He pointed and said to Song Jiang: “You see that lantern with a candle in it among the tress? Whichever way we go, east or west, it moves in that direction, and their troops gather at the lantern to meet us. It's their signal, all right.”

“How can we deal with the lantern?”

“Easy,” said Hua Rong. He fitted an arrow to his bow, urged his mount forward, and let fly. He hit the red lantern squarely, knocking it out.

With no lantern to guide them, the ambushing foe was thrown into confusion. Song Jiang told Shi Xiu to lead the way, and they fought their way out of the village.

There were shouts on the mountain ahead and a wildly dancing row of torches. Song Jiang ordered a halt. He sent Shi Xiu to investigate. Before

long, Shi returned and reported:

“It's another contingent from our fortress, come to reinforce us and scatter the enemy troops.”

Song Jiang urged his men forward into the fray, forcing a passage away from the village. The Zhu Family Manor soldiers dispersed and withdrew.

The forces of Lin Chong and Qin Ming joined up with Song Jiang's men, and they all halted outside the village. By then it was daylight. They pitched camp on high ground and counted their men and horses. Huang Xin, Suppressor of the Three Mountains, was missing. Startled, Song Jiang asked about him. The men who had been with him the night before explained.

“When Commander Huang received your order, he went to seek a path. But two hooks shot out of the reeds and tumbled his horse. Half a dozen men seized the commander and pulled him away. We couldn't rescue him.”

Song Jiang was enraged. He wanted to kill Huang's soldiers for not having reported this earlier. Lin Chong and Hua Rong finally cooled him down. The others were upset.

“We haven't taken the manor,” they said, “and we've lost two brothers besides. What are we going to do?”

“The three villages have an alliance,” said Yang Xiong. “But Li Ting, who rules the east village, was wounded by Tiger Cub Zhu the other day, and he's resting at home. Why don't you go and consult with him, brother?”

“I'd forgotten about that,” said Song Jiang. “He knows the terrain and the situation well.” He ordered that two bolts of silk, two sheep and two jugs of wine be prepared as gifts, along with a good riding horse, complete with saddle and bridle. He set out to deliver them personally, leaving Lin Chong and Qin Ming to guard the camp.

Hua Rong, Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu and three hundred cavalrymen mounted and went with him towards the Li Family Manor. At the walls,

they found the gate-house close and the drawbridge raised. Soldiers lined the ramparts. Within the gate-house, a battle drum thundered. Song Jiang shouted from his horse.

“I am Song Jiang, a warrior from Mount Liangshan, here to call on your lord. I have no other purpose. You needn't be on guard against me.”

When Du Xing saw that Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu were among the party, he opened the manor gate, came across the moat in a small boat and hailed Song Jiang respectfully. Song Jiang dismounted and returned the courtesy. Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu drew near.

“This is the brother who introduced us to Lord Li,” they said to Song Jiang. “He is known as Demon Face Du Xing.”

“Ah, Steward Du. Could I trouble you to tell Lord Li that Song Jiang of Liangshan Marsh has long known of his fame, though we have never had occasion to meet. Because we are in conflict with Zhu Family Manor, we are passing by here. I would like to present him with some colored silk, a fine horse, two sheep and some wine-trifling gifts—and request the pleasure of meeting him. I want nothing else.”

Du Xing took this message into the manor. Li Ying was seated in bed in his hall with a quilt draped over his shoulders, recovering from his wound. Du Xing told him what Song Jiang had said.

“He's a rebel from Liangshan Marsh. How can I receive him?” Li replied. “Though groundless, I would become suspect to the authorities. Say that I am sick in bed, that I can't get up and meet him. I hope to have the honor another day. As to the gifts, I cannot presume to accept them.”

Du Xing again crossed the moat. “My master sends his respects,” he said to Song Jiang. “He was hoping to welcome you in person, but because of his wound he is ill in bed and is unable to greet you. He will make a special point of it some other day. The gifts which you so graciously present, he dares not accept.”

“I know what's in your master's mind. I want to see him because I've been unsuccessful in my attack on the Zhu Family Manor. He won't see me because he's afraid they would resent it.”

“No, that's not the reason. He's really ill. Although I'm originally from Zhongshan, I've been here many years, and I know something of the local situation. The Zhu Family Manor is in the center, the Li Family Manor to the east, the Hu Family Manor to the west. They have a solemn alliance to help one another in time of danger. Because the Zhu's wounded my master, he hasn't gone to their aid. But the Hu's probably will. They're not much to worry about, except for their woman general, who's called Ten Feet of Steel because of the two shining swords she wields. She's a remarkable warrior. She and Tiger Cub of the Zhu Family are engaged, and one of these days they'll marry. When attacking the Zhu Family Manor the east needn't concern you, but watch your west.

“The manor has two gates, one facing the front of Lone Dragon Cliff, the other facing the rear. It's no use assaulting only the front gate. Both gates must be attacked simultaneously. That's the only way you can break in. The paths to the front gate are twisted and complicated. They wind round and round and are of different widths. Only those with white poplars at their starting points are through paths. The rest are dead-ends.”

“What if they cut all the poplars down?” said Shi Xiu. “How will we be able to travel?”

“The stumps will still be there, won't they? Those will be your markers. Attack only in daylight. Don't try to advance at night.”

Song Jiang thanked Du Xing and returned to camp with his party. Lin Chong and the others met them on the way, then all went to the camp and conferred. Song Jiang told of Li Ying's refusal to meet him, and of the advice given by Du Xing.

“With the best intentions in the world we send him gifts, and the oaf doesn't even come out to greet brother!” Li Kui blurted. “Give me three hundred men and I'll crack open his friggin manor and drag the varlet over by the head and make him pay our brother his proper respects!”

“You don't understand, brother,” said Song Jiang. “He's virtuous and law-abiding. He's afraid of the authorities. How could he meet us?”

Li Kui grinned. “Shy, like a child.”

Everyone laughed.

“Nevertheless, two of our brothers have been captured, and we don't know whether they're alive or dead,” said Song Jiang. “I hope you brothers will do your utmost and join with me in another attack on Zhu Family Manor.”

The other leaders rose to their feet. “Give the orders. We'll obey. Who do you want to go first?”

“If you're afraid of children, why not send me?” cried Li Kui.

“You're not suitable for the van, not this time,” said Song Jiang. While Li Kui fumed with lowered head, he selected Ma Lin, Deng Fei, Ou Peng, and the Stumpy Tiger. “You four and I will go first,” he stated.

For the second contingent he chose Dai Zong and seven others, and told them to prepare to attack via water. The third group was to be led by Lin Chong, Hua Rong, Mu Hong and Li Kui, and would be divided into two columns to serve as reinforcements.

The order of battle decided, the leaders ate, then put on their armor and mounted their horses.

Since Song Jiang himself was leading the van which would launch the first assault, it flaunted a large red banner inscribed with the word “Marshal.” He, the other four leaders, a hundred and fifty cavalrymen, and a thousand foot soldiers marched rapidly on Zhu Family Manor.

Before Lone Dragon Cliff Song Jiang drew rein and stared at their objective. Two white banners floated over the ramparts. Brightly embroidered on them were the rallying calls: *Fill in the Marsh and nab Chao Gai. Level the Mountain and catch Song Jiang.*

Angrily, Song Jiang vowed: “If I don't take Zhu Family Manor I'll never return to Mount Liangshan!”

The other leaders were equally enraged. When the second contingent arrived, Song Jiang left them to attack the front gate, while he and his unit went round to the cliff's rear. There, the manor was as solid as a wall of bronze, and heavily fortified.

While he was examining it, an enemy force came charging from the west, shouting fiercely. Song Jiang left Ma Lin and Deng Fei to hold the rear gate. With Ou Peng and Stumpy Tiger and half the men, he went forward to meet the foe. Riding towards him down the slope were about thirty horsemen. In their midst was the girl warrior known as Ten Feet of Steel, astride a black-maned steed and whirling her shining swords. Followed by four or five hundred armed vassals, she was coming to the aid of Zhu Family Manor.

“A formidable-looking adversary,” said Song Jiang. “That must be the famous daughter of the Hu Family. Who dares to give her battle?”

Wang the Stumpy Tiger was a lecherous fellow. When he heard that the warrior was a lady, he immediately hoped to capture her for his own. With a yell, he urged his mount forward, his lance levelled. Both armies shouted. The girl smote her horse and galloped towards Stumpy Tiger, flourishing her blades. A superb artisan with the double swords and an outstanding veteran with the single lance clashed in scores of rounds.

Song Jiang soon could see that Wang was no match for the girl. The short-legged man had longed to catch her quickly, but by the tenth round his hands were trembling and his legs were paralyzed with fatigue, and his skill with the lance was faltering. If they weren't in a battle to the death, Wang would gladly have yielded.

Ten Feet of Steel was an intelligent, sensitive girl. “That's a crude varlet,” she thought. She closed in, swinging both blades. It was too much for Stumpy Tiger. He turned his horse and fled, pursued by the girl warrior. She hung up her right sword, stretched forth her lovely arm, and plucked Wang

from the saddle. The vassals rushed forward, grabbed him by the feet, and dragged him off, a prisoner.

With levelled lance Ou Peng hurried to his aid. Ten Feet of Steel urged her mount forward to meet him, swords at the ready. They fought. Ou Peng was descended from generations of military men, and was first-rate with the iron lance. Song Jiang observed his skill admiringly. But despite Ou Peng's excellence, he was unable to gain the slightest advantage over the girl.

Deng Fei had seen from afar the capture of Stumpy Tiger Wang, and now witnessed the failure of Ou Peng to vanquish the girl. He galloped towards the contestants, shouting and brandishing his iron chain. The warriors of the Zhu Family Manor, who had been watching for some time, feared for the girl's safety. Quickly, they lowered the drawbridge and opened the gate. The Dragon, leading three hundred men, rode lickety-split, lance in hand, to seize Song Jiang.

Ma Lin galloped, with twin swords, to head off the Dragon. Deng Fei was worried about Song Jiang. Keeping close to him, he watched the clashes raging on both sides amid wild shouts. Song Jiang realized that Ma Lin couldn't defeat Zhu the Dragon, and Ou Peng clearly was making no headway against Ten Feet of Steel. Song Jiang was growing extremely anxious when a troop of horsemen appeared, riding in rapidly from an angle. He looked, and was delighted to recognize Qin Ming. When the Thunderbolt had heard the noise of battle at the manor, he had decided to join in.

“General Qin,” Song Jiang called, “help Ma Lin!” Qin Ming had a low flash point. The Zhu Family had captured his disciple Huang Xin, and his temper hadn't improved. He clapped his steed forward and unlimbered his wolf-toothed cudgel, riding directly at the Dragon. With raised lance, the Dragon advanced to meet him. This left Ma Lin free to lead a body of men after Stumpy Wang's captors. Ten Feet of Steel promptly abandoned Ou Peng to attack Ma Lin. Man and girl both used double swords, and their clash on horseback was like jade snowflakes swirling in the wind. Song Jiang stared, positively dazzled.

The Dragon and Qin Ming fought ten rounds or more, but the Dragon was no match for the Thunderbolt. Arms instructor in the Zhu manor, Luan Tingyu, mounted and rode forth with his hammer. Ou Peng cantered towards him. But Luan, instead of coming on directly, swerved as Ou Peng gripped his lance, and appeared to flee. Ou Peng gave chase. Luan threw his hammer, hit Ou Peng squarely and knocked him from his mount.

“Children, to the rescue,” roared Deng Fei. He charged at Luan, swinging his iron chain.

Song Jiang shouted for his men to get Ou Peng back in the saddle. The Dragon, being bested by Qin Ming, smote his horse and ran. Luan left Deng Fei to engage Qin Ming. They fought nearly twenty rounds, with no result. Luan feinted, then galloped into the wilds, with Qin Ming, brandishing his cudgel, hot on the trail. Luan raced his steed into the deep grass. Unaware that this was a ruse, Qin Ming pounded after him. Men of the Zhu Family Manor were lying in ambush. When Qin Ming appeared, they pulled taut a rope across the path and sent horse and rider tumbling to the ground. Yelling, they grabbed him. Deng Fei galloped heedlessly to save the Thunderbolt. He saw the trip tope rising before him, and pulled frantically on the rein to turn his steed.

“Get him,” cried voices on either side. Hooked ropes landed on Deng Fei like a tangle of hemp, and he too was captured, still seated on his horse.

Song Jiang groaned. The rescued Ou Peng mounted once more.

Ma Lin sped from Ten Feet of Steel to protect Song Jiang. He rode south, chased by the girl, Luan and the Dragon. He knew he couldn't get away, and was reconciling himself to being taken when he saw a bold fellow on horseback galloping towards him from due south, followed by about five hundred men, mounted and on foot.

Song Jiang recognized the rider as Mu Hong the Unrestrained. From the southeast came another three hundred fighters, preceded by two racing gallants—Yang Xiong the Pallid and Shi Xiu the Reckless. From the northeast came another bold fellow, who shouted: “Let that man alone!” It was the master bowman Hua Rong.

The rescuers converged from three directions. Song Jiang was overjoyed as they joined to do battle with Luan and the Dragon and his men. Concerned for the two, the manor command directed Tiger to hold the gates, while the young gentleman Tiger Cub sallied forth on a fiery steed, holding a long lance and leading five hundred infantry and cavalry. These plunged into the fray.

Before the manor Li Jun, Zhang Heng and Zhang Shun crossed the stream which served as a moat, but were prevented from advancing by a shower of arrows. Dai Zong and Bai Sheng, on the opposite bank, could only shout in frustration.

Daylight was fading. Song Jiang instructed Ma Lin to escort Ou Peng

safely from the village. Then he ordered that the gongs be beaten as the signal for his gallants to converge and fight their way out. He whipped up his horse and made a circuit of the combat area, worried lest any brothers had become lost.

Suddenly, he saw Ten Feet of Steel galloping towards him. He had no time to defend himself. He smote his steed and raced east, with the girl in close pursuit. Eight hoofs drummed the ground like inverted bowls as the two animals sped deep into the village. Ten Feet of Steel was catching up, and was preparing to strike when a voice boomed from the slope.

“Why is that friggin female chasing my brother?”

Song Jiang looked. Li Kui the Black Whirlwind, whirling his battle-axes, was striding towards them, leading seventy or eighty brigands. The girl reined her mount, turned and headed for the woods. But from the glade a dozen horsemen came directly at her. Foremost among them was Panther Head Lin Chong.

“Where do you think you're going?” he shouted at Ten Feet of Steel.

The girl charged him with flying swords. Lance levelled, he met her and they fought more than ten rounds. Lin Chong feinted and deliberately let the girl close in. Parrying her blades with his lance, he stretched forth an arm as

strong as an ape's, grabbed her and, with the twist of a waist as sinewy as a wolf's, yanked her over to him. Song Jiang cheered heartily. Lin told his men to bind the girl and cantered over to Song Jiang.

“Are you hurt, brother?”

“No, I'm all right,” Song replied. He instructed Li Kui to go into the village and bring out the remaining leaders. “Tell them we'll confer at the edge of the village. It's getting late. They're to stop fighting.”

Li Kui and his party left. Lin Chong, protecting Song Jiang, proceeded to the village entry, with Ten Feet of Steel mounted and under guard. The Liangshan leaders won no gains that evening. All hastened to the edge of the village.

The Zhu Family forces returned to the manor, leaving behind countless dead. They put their prisoners in cage carts. If they could capture Song Jiang, they intended to deliver the whole lot to the authorities in the Eastern Capital and claim the reward. The Hu Family had already turned Wang the Stumpy Tiger over to the Zhu Family Manor.

Song Jiang, having regathered his forces, went to the encampment at the edge of the village. He directed that Ten Feet of Steel be-brought forth, and ordered twenty veteran brigands and four mounted chief to seat the bound girl on a horse.

“Take her to Mount Liangshan tonight and deliver her to the care of my father, squire Song, then report back to me. We'll decide what to do with her when I return to the fortress.”

The leaders thought Song Jiang wanted the girl for himself, and took special care in escorting her. They sent the wounded Ou Peng on ahead in a cart to recuperate in the stronghold. The escort party set out immediately. Song Jiang brooded in his tent. He didn't sleep all night. At dawn he was still seated there.

That day a scout reported: “Military Advisor Wu Yong is coming with the three Ruan brothers, Lu Fang and Guo Sheng, and five hundred men.”

Song Jiang welcomed them outside the camp and led Wu Yong to his tent. When they were seated, Wu had wine and food laid, and toasted Song Jiang and congratulated his commanders.

“Chieftain Chao Gai has heard that you had some difficulty during your first assault. He sent me with these five leaders to lend a hand,” Wu Yong said. “How have you been getting on?”

“It's hard to put it briefly. Those rogues of the Zhu Family have a pair of white banners over their manor gate which read: *Fill in the Marsh and nab Chao Gai. Level the Mountain and catch Song Jiang.* What brass! In our first assault, because we didn't know the terrain, we lost Yang Lin and Huang Xin. Near dusk we tried again, and Ten Feet of Steel took Stumpy Tiger Wang, Luan Tingyu wounded Ou Peng with his hammer, and trip ropes unhorsed Qin Ming and Deng Fei. Both were seized. That's how bad it's been. If Lin Chong hadn't captured Ten Feet of Steel, we'd be deflated completely. We can't seem to make a dent in this place. I'll vanquish the Zhu Family Manor and rescue our brothers, or die in the attempt. I couldn't go back and face brother Chao Gai, otherwise.”

Wu Yong smiled. “Heaven has ordained that the Zhu Family Manor shall fall. This is a good opportunity for us. I think we can bring it about very soon.”

Song Jiang was amazed. “What do you mean?”

Calmly smiling, Wu Yong held up two fingers and explained.

Truly, a hand extended from the clouds and snatched to safety those who had landed in the net.

What was the opportunity of which Wu Yong spoke? Read out next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 49
The Two Suns Break Open the Jail
The Xie Brothers Make Their Escape

“A friend of Shi Yong who wants to join our band is very close to Luan Tingyu. He's also on excellent terms with Yang Lin and Deng Fei.” said Wu Yong. “He knows you've having difficulty in attacking the Zhu Family Manor. He's offering this plan as a kind of entry gift, after which he will join us. We can carry it out in five days. Doesn't that please you?”

“Marvellous,” cried Song Jiang. His face was wreathed in smiles.

About the same time the first attack on the Zhu Family Manor was in progress certain things were happening in the Shandong coastal prefecture of Dengzhou. Outside the prefectural town was a mountain infested with wild animals. These did considerable harm to human life. The prefect therefore summoned the local hunters and ordered them to kill and produce the body within a fixed time of a tiger which was roaming the mountain. The village chiefs in front of and behind the mountain were also directed to take part. If the hunters did not get results in the time allotted they would be severely punished and racks placed around their necks.

At the foot of the mountain lived two brothers who were hunters. The elder was called Xie Zhen, the younger Xie Bao. Both used two-pronged spears of steel-flecked iron and were remarkably skillful fighters. They were considered the best huntsmen in the prefecture. Xie Zhen's nickname Was Two-Headed Snake, Xie Bao's was Twin-Tailed Scorpion. Their parents were dead, and they had never married. The elder was tall, ruddy complected, with a narrow waist and broad shoulders. The younger, an even tougher fellow, was still taller, with round face, swarthy skin, and two flying demons tattooed on his legs. When possessed by one of his terrible rages, he wanted to pull up trees, shake mountains, and turn earth and sky upside down.

After hearing the prefect's edict, the two brothers returned home and made ready their snare-bow, poisoned arrow, crossbows and forked obstacles, put on their panther skin pants and tiger pelt capes, took their pronged spears and went up the mountain. They set their snare-bow, climbed a tree and waited all day. Nothing happened. They dismantled the bow and went home.

The next day they took some dry rations and again mounted the slope. They waited until dusk, then again set the snarebow and climbed a tree. By the fifth watch, there still wasn't any activity. They moved the bow to the western side of the mountain and sat until daylight, at which time they decided not to wait any longer.

Both men were growing worried. They said: “We've been give three days to catch the tiger. If we don't, we'll be punished. What are we going to do?”

At the fifth watch of the third night of their vigil, weariness overcame them. Sitting back to back, they began to doze. No sooner had they closed their eyes than they heard the twang of the snare-bow. They leaped down, grabbed their pronged spears and peered into the darkness. A tiger had been struck by the poisoned arrow and was writhing on the ground. The hunters approached, spears in hand. When the beast saw them it ran, arrow and all. The brothers gave chase. Halfway down the mountain, the poison did its work. With a roar of anguish, the tiger rolled down the slope.

“Good,” said Xie Bao. “That's Squire Mao's rear garden below. We'll go to his place and collect the tiger.”

The brother descended the mountain to the manor and knocked on the gate. By then it was dawn. A vassal opened the gate and went in to report to the squire. Before long, Squire Mao emerged. The brothers set aside their spears and hailed him respectfully.

“Uncle!” they said, “we haven't seen you in a long time. Sorry to have to trouble you.”

“What are you doing here so early, nephews? What's on your minds?”

“If it weren't important, we wouldn't dare disturb your slumbers,” said Xie Zhen. “Because of the prefect's edict, we've been out after a tiger. For three days we've been hunting, and this morning, at the fifth watch, we finally shot it. He's rolled down the slope into your rear garden. We'd like your permission to get him.”

“Of course. But why not sit a while, first? You must be hungry. Have some breakfast.” The squire instructed his vassal to bring food and wine, and urged the two brother to help themselves.

After eating they rose and thanked him. “We appreciate your kindness. We'd like to go and get that tiger, if we may.”

“Since he's in the rear part of my manor, what's there to worry about? Have some tea. There's plenty of time.”

The Xie brothers couldn't very well refuse. They sat down again while the vassal served them tea.

“And now,” said the squire, “you can collect your tiger, nephews.”

“Thank you, uncle,” said the brothers.

Squire Mao led them to the rear garden and instructed a vassal to unlock the gate. But no matter how the man tried, he couldn't budge it.

“It hasn't been opened for a long time,” the squire explained. “The lock is probably rusty. Use a hammer.”

The vassal took a hammer and smashed the lock. They all entered the garden and walked towards the part near the mountain. There was no tiger.

“Could you be mistaken, nephews?” queried the squire. “Maybe you didn't watch carefully. Maybe it didn't land in my garden.”

“How could we be mistaken?” said Xie Zhen. “We were born and raised here. Wouldn't we know where we were?”

“Search for yourselves. If you find it, you can take it away.”

“Brother, look at this,” cried Xie Bao. “This patch of grass has been rolled flat, and here are bloodstains. Who says this isn't the place? Some of uncle's vassals must have carried it off!”

“Don't talk like that,” said the squire. “How would our household's vassals know there was a tiger in the rear garden? And carry it away? You saw that we had to break the lock open. We went into the garden with you and let you search. How can you say such things?”

“Uncle,” said Xie Zhen. “You'd better give us back our tiger. We have to turn it over to the authorities.”

“You two are completely unreasonable. I invite you to breakfast and you invent a story that we've stolen your tiger.”

“Invent, nothing. Your family was also informed of the authorities' time limit. You hadn't the skill to catch your own tiger, so you took ours. Now, you'll claim a reward while we two brothers will be beaten.”

“What's it to me if you're beaten?”

The young men glared. “Do you dare let us make a thorough search?”

“Is this your home or mine? Every family is entitled to its privacy. You beggars have no manners whatsoever.”

Xie Bao forced his way into the hall. No tiger. Fury rose in his heart and he started fighting. Xie Zhen smashed the railing in front of hall and barged in with him.

The squire set up a howl. “Xie Zhen and Xie Bao are robbing us in broad daylight!”

The brothers pulverized the furniture. They saw the whole manor was getting ready to come at them in force, and they left with quick strides through the front gate.

They pointed accusingly and shouted: “You've stolen our tiger! We'll let the court decide this!”

At that moment two or three riders approached the manor, leading a band of men. Xie Zhen recognized Mao Zhongyi, the squire's son.

“Your vassals have stolen our tiger, and your father refuses to return it! In fact he wants to beat us up!”

“Those rustics are very ignorant. My father must have been deceived by them. Don't be angry. Come in with me and I'll see to it that you get it.”

The brothers thanked him. Mao Zhongyi shouted for the vassals to open the gate, and he asked Xie Zhen and Xie Bao to enter. Then he ordered that the gate be closed, and he yelled: “Grab them!”

From porches on both sides of the courtyard twenty or thirty vassals converged on the two brothers, joined by the men who had arrived with the riders. These latter were police. The brothers were overpowered before they could defend themselves, and bound.

“Our household shot a tiger last night,” Mao Zhongyi asserted. “How can you make false claims against us? And you force your way in, rob our valuables and smash our furniture. That's criminal. Turn them over to the authorities. We'll be ridding our prefecture of a scourge!”

Actually, Mao Zhongyi had delivered the tiger at the fifth watch to the prefectural office. He brought police back with him to size the Xie brothers. The two were fooled by his ruse more easily than he expected, and now no one would listen to them. The squire put a bag of “loot" with their pronged spears and added a number of pieces of wrecked furniture as “evidence.” These and the prisoners, who were stripped naked and their hands tied behind their backs, were taken into the prefectural town.

Wang Zheng, the court clerk, was the squire's son-in-law. He spoke first to the prefect. Xie Zhen and Xie Bao were then brought before the court. They were not permitted to say anything, but were bound and beaten. The prefect insisted they admit that “on the pretext of seeking a tiger, we entered with pronged spears and forceably committed armed robbery.” When the brothers could stand the beating no longer, they, confessed as demanded.

The prefect ordered that a rack of twenty-five catties be fixed around the neck of each man and that they be confined to prison.

Father and son returned to the manor and conferred. “Those two varlets mustn't be released. The best thing would be to kill them, to avoid any future trouble.”

They went into town and gave private instructions to the clerk Wang Zheng: “We want this grass pulled up by the roots so that it won't sprout again. We will see to it that inducements are paid on every level, from the prefect right on down.”

Xie Zhen and Xie Bao were delivered to the prison's section for the condemned, and men were brought to a pavilion to meet the warden. His name was Bao Ji, and he had already received Squire Mao's silver and instructions from Clerk Wang to kill the two brothers. Bao was seated in the center of the pavilion.

A keeper said to the young hunters: “Go quickly and kneel before him.”

“So you're the so-called Two-Headed Snake and the Twin Tailed Scorpion, are you?” Bao snarled.

“Those are nicknames others have given us,” said Xie Zhen. “But we've never harmed any good people.”

“Animals,” the warden barked. “I'm going to turn you into a One-Headed Snake and a Single-Tailed Scorpion! Take them and lock them up.”

The keeper led them back to their cell. He looked to see that no one was around, then said: “Do you know me? I'm the brother of your brother's wife.”

“We are our family's only sons. We don't have any brother,” Xie Zhen said.

“Aren't you brothers of Major Sun?”

“He's the brother of our paternal cousin's husband. We've never met you. Could you be Yue Ho?”

“The same. My name is Yue Ho. We're originally from Maozhou Prefecture, before my ancestors moved here. My older sister married Major Sun. I work in this place as a jailkeep. Because I sing well people call me Iron Throat. My brother-in-law, seeing that I like weapons play, has taught me a few styles of fighting with the lance.”

This Yue Ho was a quick and clever fellow. He had easily learned to play many musical instruments, and was orderly and thorough. As for lances and staves, they were like sugar and honey to him. He saw that the two brothers were gallant lads and he wanted to save them. But you can't spin a rope with one strand, you cannot applaud with one hand. He could only give them a bit of news.

“I'll tell you something,” he said. “Bao Ji the warden has been bribed by Squire Mao. He's sure to try and kill you both. What are you going to do?”

“If you hadn't mentioned Major Sun I wouldn't have thought of it,” said Xie Zhen. “But since you have, I'd like you to deliver a message.”

“To whom?”

“To a woman relative on my father's side. She's married to the brother of Major Sun. They live outside East Gate in the hamlet of Ten Li Marker. Actually, she's a cousin, and she's known as Mistress Gu, the Tigress. She and her husband run a tavern. They also have a slaughter-house and a place to gamble. When she fights, no twenty or thirty men can touch her. Even Sun Xin, her husband, can't vanquish her, skilled as he is with weapons. She's very fond of my brother and me. And my mother is Sun Xin and Sun Li's aunt. So they're also cousins, but on my mother's side. If you would be good enough to let them know, secretly, I'm sure our cousin the Tigress would come and rescue us.”

“I'll attend to it, kinsmen, rest assured.”

Yue Ho went out and got some buns and cooked meat, which he sneaked into them. Then, on the excuse of urgent personal business, he locked the prison door, entrusted the key to a minor keeper and hurried out of the town's East Gate to the hamlet of Ten Li Marker. He soon found the tavern.

Slabs of beef and mutton were hanging outside its door. In the rear of the tavern was a gambling room. A woman sat behind the counter. Confident that this was Mistress Gu, Yue Ho approached and hailed her respectfully.

“Is this the Sun place?”

“It is. Would you like some wine, sir? Or do you want to buy meat, perhaps? If you'd like to gamble, we've a room in the back.”

“My name is Yue Ho. I'm the younger brother of Major Sun's wife.”

“So it's you, cousin Yue Ho.” Mistress Gu smiled. “You look just like her. Do come in and have some tea.”

Yue Ho followed her inside and was seated as a guest.

“I heard you were working in town,” said Mistress Gu. “But we're poor and have little spare time, so we've had no chance to meet you. What wind blows you here today?”

“I wouldn't dare disturb you if it weren't important. Two new felons were brought to our prison today. Although we had never met, their names were well known to me—Xie Zhen the Two-Headed Snake and Xie Bao the Twin-Tailed Scorpion.”

“They're my cousins. Why have they been put in prison?”

“They killed a tiger, and a rich landlord, Squire Mao, stole it from them. Then he had them seized as thieves and armed robbers, and taken before the prefect. He's bribed everyone, high and low. Sooner or later, Bao li the warden is going to have them murdered. It's unfair, and I don't like it, but I can't save them on my own. Since we're related, and chivalry comes first, I told them what I knew. They said no one but you can rescue them. That may be, but only if you act fast.”

Mistress Gu uttered a cry of lamentation. She shouted to her assistants to fetch her husband. Several of them ran out, and soon returned with Sun Xin, who was introduced to Yue Ho. Sun's family had been military men for

generations. They came from Qiongzhou. Because their unit was transferred to Dengzhou, the two Sun brothers had moved with it.

Sun Xin was big and strong. Having learned his skill with arms from his army brother, he was deft with a ribbed rod, and was known as the Junior General. His wife told him the story.

“You'd better go back, cousin,” he said to Yue Ho. “They're already in prison. We'll need you to look after them. As soon as my wife and I think out a plan, we'll join you directly.”

“Any way I can be of service, I'll be glad to do my best.”

Mistress Gu served Yue Ho wine and gave him a bag of silver. “Spread this around among the minor keepers,” she said, “to make sure they take good care of our cousins.”

Yue Ho thanked her, took the silver, returned to the prison and put the money to use. Of that we'll say no more.

Mistress Gu conferred with Sun Xin. “Any ideas on how to save them?” she asked.

“That scoundrel Squire Mao has money and power. He wants to prevent your cousins from ever coming out. He won't quit till he's made sure. He certainly will see to it that they're killed. They have to be snatched out of that prison. There isn't any other solution.”

“I'll go with you tonight,” said Mistress Gu.

Sun smiled. “You're too rash. We must have a long-range plan. We need a place to go after the jailbreak. We can't carry it off, anyhow, without the help of my brother and two other men I have in mind.”

“Who are they?”

“An uncle and a nephew who are made about gambling—Zou Yuan and Zou Run. At present they are robbers on the Mountain in the Clouds. We're on very good terms. If I can get them, we can do it.”

“The Mountain in the Clouds isn't far. Go immediately and invite them here for a conference.”

“I'll do that. You get some wine and tasty dishes ready. They'll come if I ask them.”

Mistress Gu instructed her assistants to slaughter a hog, and she laid the table with wine and platters of fruit and delicacies.

By dusk Sun returned with two bold fellows. The first was Zou Yuan. A Laizhou man, he loved gambling since childhood, and had always been an idler. But he was loyal and generous, and skilled with several weapons. He could be forceful and relentless, too, when the occasion arose. In the gallant fraternity he was known as the Dragon from the Forest.

The second man was his nephew Zou Run. The two were about the same age, and there was not much difference between them. Big and tall, Zou Run had a peculiar feature—a tumor on the back of his head. Whenever he lost his temper in a fight, he would butt his opponent. One day he suddenly butted a pine tree and snapped it in two, astonishing his watchers. From then on everybody called him the One-Horned Dragon.

Mistress Gu invited them into the inner room and urged them to be seated. She told the whole story and raised the question of raiding the prison.

“I have eighty or ninety men under my command, but only about twenty I can trust,” said Zou Yuan. “And we won't be able to stay in these parts after we do the job. There's a place I've been thinking of going for a long time. I wonder whether you two would be willing to join us.”

“We'll go anywhere you like, as long as you save my cousins,” said Mistress Gu.

“Liangshan Marsh is thriving, and Song Jiang is very agreeable to accepting new members. There are three friends of mine under his command—Elegant Panther Yang Lin, Deng Fei the Fiery-Eyed Lion, and Shi Yong the General. They joined the band a long time ago. After we've rescued your

cousins, we'll all go to Mount Liangshan and join up, too. What do you say?”

“Couldn't be better,” cried Mistress Gu. “Anyone who tries to back out I'll puncture to death with my lance!”

“There's one thing, though,” Zou Run reminded them. “When we've got our men, what if Dengzhou sends troops and cavalry after us?”

“My older brother is a major in the prefectural garrison, and he's the best fighter they have,” said Sun Xin. “Whenever bandits attack the town, he's the one who kill and scatters them. His reputation is known all over. I'll invite him here tomorrow and get his promise to help.”

“I'm afraid he won't want to turn outlaw,” said Zou Yuan.

“I have an excellent way to convince him.” Sun Xin replied.

They drank till half the night was gone, then retired till the following morning. Sun kept his guests at home with him, and dispatched an assistant and a couple of men to town with a large cart, which they pushed. “Go quickly to the garrison and see my brother Major Sun and my sister-in-law Mistress Yue. Say: 'My mistress is very ill and hopes you will come at once.'”

To which Mistress Gu added: “Say my condition is critical, that I have something important to tell them. Say they must come, that this is their last chance to see and hear me.”

The assistant went off with the cart and Sun Xin waited at the doorway. Around lunch time, he saw the cart in the distance, bringing his sister-in-law, with his brother on horseback, followed by a dozen foot soldiers. As the procession neared Ten Li Marker, Sun Xin reported to his wife: “They're coming.”

“Now this is what I want you to do,” said Mistress Gu. In an undertone, she gave her instructions.

Sun Xin went out and greeted his brother and sister-in-law. As Mistress Yue got down from the cart, he asked her to come in and see the patient. Sun Li dismounted and also entered. He was indeed a fine figure of a man. Very tall, with a full beard, he was known as the Sickly General because of his yellow-tinged complexion. But he pulled a stiff bow, rode a spirited horse, and wielded a long lance. From his wrist hung a steel rod with tiger eyes and ridged like a bamboo. People turned faint at the very sight of it.

As he walked through the gate with his brother, Sun Li asked: “What's wrong with sister-in-law?”

“She has a very peculiar ailment. Let's talk about it inside.”

Sun Li entered. Sun Xin told his assistant to take the soldiers to the tavern opposite and give them drinks, and to bring the horse into the yard. He urged Sun Li to be seated.

After a while, Sun Xin said to his visitors: “Please come in and see the patient.”

He led them to an inner room, but no one was there.

“What room is she resting in?” Sun Li asked.

Just then, Mistress Gu entered, followed by Zou Yuan and Zou Run.

“What ailment have you, sister-in-law?” queried Sun Li.

“Brother-in-law, my respects. I'm suffering from a need to rescue cousins.”

“This is very strange. Rescue which cousins?”

“You're not deaf and dumb. Surely you know those two in town are my cousins. And yours, as well.”

“I don't understand. Which two do you mean?”

“The matter is urgent. I'll come straight to the point. Squire Mao at the foot of the Mountain in the Clouds and Clerk Wang are plotting against Xie

Zhen and Xie Bao, and sooner or later are going to have them killed. I've talked it over with these two bold fellows. We're going to raid the prison, rescue them, and all join the band in Liangshan Marsh. Since you'll probably be implicated, I feigned illness and invited you and sister-in-law here to tell you of our plan. If you don't want to go with us, we'll go alone. What justice can we expect from the imperial court? If we leave, nothing will happen to us. If we stay, we'll be prosecuted. 'The nearest to the flames is the first burned,' as the saying goes. You'll be made the scapegoat and go to prison, and there'll be no one to send you food and rescue you. What do you think of our idea?"

"I'm a military officer of Dengzhou Prefecture. How dare I do such a thing?"

"Since you refuse, you and I must fight to the death, right now!"

Mistress Gu produced two sabres, and Zou Yuan and Zou Run both pulled out daggers.

"Wait, sister-in-law," Sun Li shouted. "Not so fast. I'm thinking of the future. Let's talk this over."

Mistress Yue was so frightened she couldn't utter a word. "Even if you won't go, at least send sister-in-law on ahead," said Mistress Gu. "We'll stage the raid without you."

"Let me go home and pack some things first and see how the land lies, since you're going through with it. Then we'll go into action."

"This news was leaked to us by your brother-in-law Yue Ho. You can get your luggage together while we're raiding the prison. There'll still be time."

Sun Li sighed. "If that's how you people want it, I can't prevent you. The authorities would surely prosecute me after you'd gone. All right, then. Let's talk this over and get started."

It was arranged for Zou Yuan to go to his stronghold on the Mountain in the Clouds, collect his valuables and horses, and come back with twenty trusted

men. Zou Yuan departed. Sun Xin would go into town, find out what news Yue Ho had, fix a time for the raid, and get word secretly to Xie Zhen and Xie Bao.

The next day, having gathered his gold and silver on the Mountain in the Clouds, Zou Yuan returned with his men. These, plus the seven or eight loyal assistants of Sun Xin, and the dozen soldiers Sun Li had brought, made a total of over forty. Sun Xin slaughtered two pigs and a sheep, and saw to it that everyone ate his fill. He instructed Mistress Gu to carry daggers concealed on her person and enter the prison disguised as a woman delivering food. The forces were divided into two groups and proceeded towards town. Sun Xin went with Sun Li. Zou Yuan led Zou Run.

Bao Ji, the warden of the Dengzhou prison, had received money from Squire Mao and was waiting for a chance to murder the two young hunters. Yue Ho, holding his staff of office, was standing in the passage of the prison gateway, when he heard the entry bell ring.

“Who's there?” he called.

“A woman with food,” Mistress Gu replied.

Yue Ho guessed it was she, and opened the gate and let her in. Then he closed it and led her along the corridor. From the pavilion, Bao Ji spotted her.

“Who is that woman?” he yelled. “How dare she deliver food here? 'No outside contact is allowed in prisons' since ancient times.”

“She's the Xie brothers' sister. She's bringing them something to eat.”

“Don't let her in. Give it to them yourself.”

Yue Ho took the food, opened the cell door and handed it to the hunters.

“What we talked about last night, how's it going?” they asked.

“Your cousin is already in. We're just waiting for the others to get set.”

Yue Ho opened their fetters. They heard a keeper announcing: “Major Sun is knocking at the gate.”

“He's a garrison officer,” said Bao Ji. “What does he want in my prison? Don't let him in.”

Mistress Gu moved swiftly towards the pavilion.

Outside, someone called: “Major Sun is pounding on the gate.”

Angrily, Bao Ji came down from the pavilion.

“Where are my brothers?” Mistress Gu shouted at him. She pulled out two gleaming daggers.

Bao Ji could see that he was in danger, and he started to hurry from the courtyard. He ran right into the Xie brothers, who had dashed out of their cell, the racks in their hands. Before Bao Ji could defend himself, Xie Zhen struck him heavily with the corner of his rack, crushing the warden's skull.

Mistress Gu had already stabbed four or live keepers. Yelling, she and the two hunters fought their way out. Sun Li and Sun Xin were at the gate. When they saw four figures emerging, they all went quickly towards the front of the prefectural office. Zou Yuan and Zou Run were just coming out, carrying Clerk Wang's head.

Shouting fiercely, the whole company marched off, those on foot in the lead, Major Sun riding his horse, and arrow fitted to his bow, covering the rear. People along the street closed their doors. No one dared show himself. The prefectural police recognized Major Sun and were afraid to intervene.

Crowded around Sun Li, the party sped through the town gate and went directly to Ten Li Marker. There, Mistress Yue was helped onto a cart, Mistress Gu mounted a horse, and the procession continued.

“Why don't we take our revenge on that old crook Squire Mao?” Xie Zhen and Xie Bao proposed.

“A good idea,” said Sun Li. To Sun Xin and Yue Ho he said: “Escort the cart and keep going. We'll catch up with you.”

The two did as they were instructed. With the Xie brothers, Zou Yuan, Zou Run, and the rest of his cohorts, Sun Li proceeded directly to Squire Mao's Manor. Mao Zhongyi was giving a feast in honor of his father's birthday. They were completely unprepared when a host of bold fellows came charging in, shouting and killing. Squire Mao, his son and their entire family, old and young, were slaughtered. In the bedrooms, the raiders collected gold and silver and other valuables and wrapped them into a dozen bundles. They led out seven or eight good horses from the stable in the rear, and on four of these loaded their loot. Xie Zhen and Xie Bao also selected some fine clothes and put them on. They set fire to the manor and mounted their horses.

Hurrying for thirty *li*, they caught up with the cart. The whole party then continued together. They took another four or five good horses from a manor house along the way, marching swiftly through the night towards Liangshan Marsh.

In a day or two they reached Shi Yong's tavern. Zou Yuan asked him about Yang Lin and Deng Fei.

“They went with Song Jiang to attack the Zhu Family Manor, but two assaults both failed. I hear that Yang and Deng were captured. I don't know what's become of them. It's said that the three sons of the manor are brave warriors, and that they were helped by their weapons teacher Iron Staff Luan Tingyu, and that's why our two attacks were defeated.”

Sun Li laughed. “We plan to join your stronghold, but we haven't shown the slightest merit. Suppose we offer a plan for cracking the manor for you? How will that be as an entrance gift?”

Shi Yong was delighted. “I'll be pleased to hear it.”

“Luan and I both learned our skill with arms from the same teacher. We each use weapons in the same way and know the same military arts. If I were to say I was being transferred from the Dengzhou to the Yunzhou

army garrison and wanted to drop in to see him while passing by, he surely would invite me in. With me and my party striking from within, and your forces attacking from without, we'd be certain to win. How does that sound?”

While Sun Li was speaking, a junior officer reported: “Our Military Advisor Wu Yong has come down from the mountain and is heading for Zhu Family Manor.”

Shi Yong directed the messenger to request the Military Advisor to come and meet the new arrivals. Before the words were out of his mouth, several mounted men trotted up to the tavern. They were Lu Fang, Guo Sheng, and the three Ruan brothers. Behind came Wu Yong, at the head of five hundred troops. Shi Yong escorted the leaders into the tavern, then brought in Sun Li and the others and introduced them. He told of their intention to join the band, and of Sun Li's plan.

Wu Yong was extremely pleased. “Since you bold fellows are willing to join us,” he said, “I suggest you don't go up the mountain yet, but come with us to the Zhu Family Manor and carry this meritorious scheme to a successful conclusion. Will that suit you?”

Sun Li and the others gladly consented.

“I will go ahead with my men,” said Wu Yong. “You gallants follow after.”

Wu Yong went first to Song Jiang's camp, where he found him frowning and depressed. He drank with him to cheer him up and told him the news.

“Shi Yong, Yang Lin and Deng Fei know the major of the Denzhou garrison, Sun Li the Sickly General. He and Luan Tingyu, the weapons instructor in the Zhu Family Manor, both learned from the same teacher. Sun Li is here with seven men to join our band. As an entrance gift he's offering a plan, in which he'll take part, for attacking the manor from within and without. He's on his way here to see you.”

Song Jiang soared out of his dark mood to the highest joy. He ordered that wine be prepared and a feast be laid, and waited for his guests.

Sun Li told his entourage to find a place to rest. He brought the Xie brothers, the two Zou's, Sun Xin, Mistress Gu and Yue Ho, to call on Song Jiang. After courtesies were exchanged, Song Jiang wined and dined them. Of that we'll say no more.

Wu Yong quietly notified his forces of secret signals. On the third day, they would do this...on the fifth day they would do that...The plans finalized, Sun Li and his party, with their cart, and people on horse and on foot, advanced towards the Zhu Family Manor.

To Dai Zong, Wu Yong said: “Please go up to the fortress and bring back four leaders. I need them.”

Dai Zong departed on his mission that same night.

And as a result, new wings were added to the land of the Marsh, and the mountain stronghold changed forever its original garb.

Who were the four leaders Wu Yong sent for? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 50
Wu Yong Uses a Double Linked Plan
Song Jiang's Third Attack on the Zhu Family Manor

“I want Ironclad Virtue Pei Xuan, the Master Hand Xiao Rang, Hou Jian the Long-Armed Ape and the Jade-Armed Craftsman Jin Dajian,” said Wu Yong. “Tell them to bring their tools and come down the mountain tonight. I need them.”

Dai Zong departed.

A soldier posted outside the camp entered and reported: “Hu Cheng, from the Hu Family Manor in the west, is here with gifts of cattle and wine. He asks to see you.”

Song Jiang said to invite him in. Hu Cheng approached the tent in the center of camp, kowtowed, and offered a sincere plea.

“My sister is young and untutored. In a moment of rudeness she offended you and your generals captured her. I'm here to beg forgiveness. It is because she has been pledged to a son of the Zhu Family that she displayed a misplaced valor and landed in captivity. If you will release her, whatever you require you have only to command and I will deliver.”

“Please be seated,” said Song Jiang. “That Zhu Family are boors. They're always picking on the people of our mountain stronghold. For that reason we've come with armed forces to avenge ourselves. We have nothing against the Hu Family. Your sister and her men seized our Stumpy Tiger Wang. And so we returned the compliment and captured her. Give Wang back to us and you can have your sister.”

“Though we didn't expect it, the Zhu Family have already taken him.”

“Where is he now?” Wu Yong asked. “Locked up in their manor. I don't dare ask for him.”

“If you don't return the Stumpy Tiger, how can we release your sister?” Song Jiang said.

“Don't talk like that, brother,” Wu Yong urged. “Let me say a few words. Sooner or later the Zhu Family is going to have an alarm. Don't send people from your manor to help them. If any of them try to take refuge with you, tie them up and bring them here. When you do that, we'll return your sister. She's not in this camp. We sent her to our mountain fortress the other day and entrusted her to the care of Squire Song. You needn't worry. We have a plan.”

“I wouldn't dare go to the aid of the Zhu Family. Should any of their people seek refuge with me, I'll bind them and bring them here to you.”

“If you do that,” said Song Jiang, “it will be worth more to us than any gold or brocade.”

Hu Cheng thanked them and left.

We'll tell now of Sun Li who changed his banner to read: *Sun Li Major of the Dengzhou Garrison.* He arrived at the rear gate of the Zhu Family Manor with his company of men and horses. The soldiers on the walls, seeing the banner, reported to their leaders.

“He's like a brother to me. Since childhood we learned to play with weapons from the same teacher,” Luan Tingyu said to the three sons of the Zhu Family. “I wonder what he's doing here.”

Luan opened the manor gate, lowered the drawbridge, and rode out with twenty men to welcome him. Sun Li and his company dismounted. They exchanged greetings.

“I thought you're with the Dengzhou garrison,” said Luan. “What are you doing in these parts?”

“The high command has transferred me here to Yunzhou Prefecture to defend the cities and town against the bandits of Liangshan Marsh. We were passing by and I knew that you were with the Zhu Family Manor, so I came to see how you are. We intended to approach your front gate, but the village entry was full of troops and cavalry. I didn't want to disturb them. I came along the paths through the hamlets to the rear gate to pay my respects.”

“We've had one clash after another with those bandits the last few days. We've already caught several of their leaders. When we get Song Jiang, their chief, we'll turn them all over to the authorities. How fortunate we are that you've come to protect us! You'll be like 'flowery stitches on brocade', like 'rain to parched sprouts'.”

Sun Li smiled. “I have no talent. But I can assist you to nab those rogues, so that your worthy goal will be achieved.”

Luan was delighted. He led them into the manor, pulled up the drawbridge and bolted the gate. Sun Li and his party changed into fresh clothes and were presented in the main hall to Lord Zhu and his three sons. After courtesies were exchanged, Luan addressed Zhu:

“My brother Sun Li is known as the Sickly General. He was major of the Dengzhou garrison, but the high command has just transferred him here to protect Yunzhou.”

“I too shall be under your supervision,” said Lord Zhu.

“Scarcely that, with my lowly rank. I shall be looking forward to constant enlightenment by you, and your instructions.”

The three sons invited the guests to be seated.

“You must be weary, after several days of fighting,” Sun Li said to them.

“There's been no decisive battle as yet,” said the Dragon. “But you brothers must be tired from your long journey in the saddle.”

Sun Li instructed Mistress Gu and Mistress Yue to go to the rear chambers and pay their respects to the female members of the household. Then he summoned Sun Xin, Xie Zhen and Xie Bao, and presented them.

“These three are my brothers,” he said. He pointed at Yue Ho. “This is the officer sent from Yunzhou to fetch me.” Indicating Zou Yuan and Zou Run, he said: “These two are army officers from Dengzhou.”

Zhu and his three sons were clever. But Sun Li had come with women and children, luggage and carts. What's more, he was an old friend of Luan Tingyu. Why should they suspect him? They ordered that cows and horses be slaughtered and a feast be laid, after which the guests were wined and dined.

A day or two later a soldier of the manor reported: “Song Jiang is sending another force against us.”

“I'll go and take that robber personally,” said Tiger Cub. He left the manor, lowered the drawbridge and led forth a hundred mounted men.

Ahead were five hundred fighters, on horse and on foot. The chieftain in their lead was equipped with a bow and arrows. Twirling his lance, he urged his beast forward. It was Hua Rong.

When Tiger Cub saw him he spurred his mount, levelled his lance and charged. Hua Rong galloped towards Tiger Cub. Before Lone Dragon Cliff they fought a dozen rounds, with neither vanquishing the other. Hua Rong executed a feint, turned and moved off. Tiger Cub was about to give chase when one of his cohorts recognized his opponent.

“Don't pursue him, general. He might strike you a sneak blow,” the man called. “He's a crack archer.”

Tiger Cub reined his animal to a halt, then led his party back into the manor and raised the drawbridge. Hua Rong and his contingent were last seen riding away. Tiger Cub dismounted in front of the main hall and went to the rear chambers for food and drink.

“Did you catch any robbers today, young general?” Sun Li asked.

“Among those louts was some Hua Rong or other, a first-rate man with the lance. We fought fifty rounds, then he withdrew. I wanted to go after him, but my soldiers said he's fantastic with the bow and arrow. So I brought my company back.”

“Though I'm not very capable, in a day or so I'll nab him and few of his gang.”

At the feast that day Sun Li had Yue Ho sing a few ballads, to the pleasure of the assembled diners. In the evening the gathering broke up, and all retired for the night.

A manor soldier suddenly reported, around noon of the fourth day: “Song Jiang's forces are coming at us again.”

The three sons of the Zhu Family donned their armor and went outside the manor gate. They could hear the crash of gongs and the thunder of drums in the distance. The shouting foe, banners waving, had spread out in battle formation. Lord Zhu took his seat in the tower atop the gate. To his left was Luati Tingyu, to his right was Major Sun Li. The three sons and the men Sun Li had brought were arrayed before the gate.

From the enemy position Panther Head Lin Chong shouted imprecations. Stung, the Dragon yelled for the drawbridge to be lowered. He took his lance, mounted, and rode forth with two hundred foot soldiers and cavalry. They galloped, shouting, towards Lin Chong. In the gatehouse the big drums pounded, and the two sides winged arrows against each other.

Lin Chong raised his long, serpent lance and engaged the Dragon in combat. Thirty rounds they fought, with neither being the victor. On each side gongs crashed, and both contestants withdrew.

The Tiger was enraged. Sabre in hand, he climbed into the saddle and raced upon the field, shouting his challenge: “Song Jiang, fight to a finish!”

Before the sound of his voice had died away, a rider emerged from the opposite ranks. Mu Hong the Unrestrained had come to do battle. The two fought for thirty rounds, again with no result. Tiger Cub was furious. Seizing his lance he flew onto his horse, and galloped forth with two hundred cavalrymen.

Yang Xiong the Pallid, astride his steed, lance in hand, charged from the Song Jiang position to meet him. Now the two sides were locked in slashing combat and Sun Li could restrain himself no longer.

“Get my ridged rod,” he called to his brother Sun Xin. “And my armor, helmet and robe.”

He put on his equipment and let out his own horse, known as the Piebald Steed. Heaving the saddle on its back, he tightened the three girths, hung the tiger-eyed, ridged steel rod from his wrist, grasped his lance, and mounted. To the accompaniment of crashing gongs from the Zhu Family Manor, Sun Li rode onto the field.

Lined up opposite on the other side, their animals reined in motionless, were Lin Chong, Mu Hong and Yang Xiong. “I'll take those rogues,” Sun Li exclaimed as he cantered forward. Pulling his beast to a halt, he shouted: “If there's a good fighter among you thieving scoundrels let him come forward and battle with me to the death!”

A rider galloped out, bridle bells tinkling. Everyone stared. It was Shi Xiu the Rash. The gap between the horses narrowed, and the two lances met. Fifty rounds the contestants fought. Sun Li feinted, letting Shi Xiu close in and thrust. Agilely, he dodged, yanked Shi Xiu from the saddle, carried him under one arm to the front of the manor, and dumped him on the ground.

“Tie him up,” he shouted.

Meanwhile, the three sons had thrown Song Jiang's forces into disarray, scattering and driving them off.

The three sons gathered their men and returned to the foot of the gate tower. They clasped their hands together and bowed to Sun Li respectfully.

“How many robbers have been captured so far?” Sun Li asked.

“The first one we caught was Shi Qian,” Lord Zhu volunteered. “Then we took the spy Yang Lin. Later we captured Huang Xin. Ten Feet of Steel of the Hu Family Manor caught Stumpy Tiger Wang. Two more were taken on the battlefield—Qin Ming and Deng Fei. Today, you, sir, captured Shi Xiu. The lout burned down my inn. That makes a total of seven.”

“Don't hurt any of them. Build seven cage-carts, quickly. But give them food and wine, keep them in good health. It would look bad if we starved them. Later, when we've taken Song Jiang, we'll deliver them all to the Eastern Capital. Everyone will know your fame, and will sing the praises of the three sons of the Zhu Family.”

Lord Zhu thanked him. “We are fortunate to have your help, Major. The Liangshan Marsh gang is doomed.”

He invited Sun Li to a feast in the rear hall. Shi Xiu was locked in a cage-cart.

Hear me, gentle reader: Shi Xiu's skill with weapons was in no way inferior to Sun Li's. But to fool the Zhu Family he let himself be taken. This caused the manor people to trust the major completely. Sun Li secretly instructed Zou Yuan, Zou Run and Yue Ho to check the number of doors in the rear

building. At the sight of them, Yang Lin and Deng Fei were pleased. Seeing that no one was around, Yue Ho softly told the prisoners of the latest developments. Mistresses Gu and Yue, in the compound's interior, looked over the entrances and exits of the living quarters.

On the fifth day, Sun Li and the others strolled around the manor. Shortly after breakfast a soldier reported: “Song Jiang has divided his forces into four columns and is advancing to attack.”

“Even if he had ten columns, what would it matter?” said Sun Li to the Zhu Family. “Tell your underlings not to be alarmed, but just get ready. First, conceal a party with hooks and snares. We want live prisoners. Dead ones are no use.”

The men of the manor donned their armor, and Lord Zhu went with a group to watch from the gate tower. To the east they could see a body of men and horses approaching, led by Panther Head Lin Chong. Behind him were Li Jun and Ruan the Second, and five hundred fighters on horse and on foot. From the west another five hundred were coming, with Hua Rong in the lead, followed by Zhang Heng and Zhang Shun. Due south were five hundred more, commanded by Mu Hong the Unrestrained, Yang Xiong the Pallid, and Black Whirlwind Li Kui. In every direction infantry and cavalry were advancing, battle drums pounding in unison, shouts rising to the skies.

“Those villains are coming at us in force today,” said Luan Tingyu. “We mustn't underestimate them. I shall take a company through the rear gate and deal with the foe to the northwest.”

“I shall go through the front gate and fight the eastern foe,” said the Dragon.

“I'll also go through the rear gate and take on the enemy attacking from the southwest,” said the Tiger.

“I'm going via the front gate to grab Song Jiang,” said the Tiger Cub. “He's the chief robber.”

Pleased, Lord Zhu rewarded them with cups of wine. All mounted and sallied forth with troops of three hundred cavalry each. Those remaining to guard the manor stood in front of the gate towers and cheered. Zou Yuan and Zou Run had already hidden big axes and were standing near the door of the building which held the prisoners. The Xie brothers, also with concealed weapons, stayed close to the rear gate. Sun Xin and Yue Ho were in position on either side of the front gate. Mistress Gu, after having assigned soldiers to protect Mistress Yue, paced with a pair of daggers before the hall, ready to strike at the signal.

Three volleys thundered on the manor drums, a cannon boomed, the front and rear gates swung open, the drawbridges were lowered, and the army surged forth. Four Zhu Family contingents marched to engage the foe.

Sun Li and a dozen men promptly occupied the front bridge. On the gate tower, Sun Li unfurled the original banner. Yue Ho, lance in hand, entered, singing. At the sound of his voice, Zou Yuan and Zou Run whistled several times, shrilly. Swinging their axes, they cut down the few dozen soldiers guarding the temporary prison and broke open the cage-carts. The seven released captives seized lances from the weapons racks. When she heard their shouts, Mistress Gu charged into the inner chambers and slaughtered all the women with her daggers. Lord Zhu recognized his danger and ran to jump into a well, but Shi Xiu hacked him down with one bow of his sabre and cut off his head.

The ten or more bold fellows separated to kill the manor soldiers. Near the rear gate the Xie brothers set fire to the haystacks. Black smoke tunneled into the sky. When the attackers saw this, they redoubled their forward drive.

Tiger, seeing the manor ablaze, hastened back. “Where do you think you're going,” shouted Sun Li, and blocked his passage over the bridge. Tiger understood. He turned his steed and galloped toward Song Jiang's position. But Lu Fang and Guo Sheng, waiting with barbed lances, tumbled horse and rider. Brigand fighters swarmed all over him and chopped him to mincemeat. The soldiers in front of the manor scattered, and Sun Li and Sun Xin escorted Song Jiang in.

To the east, the Dragon found he was no match for Lin Chong. He raced his horse to the rear of the manor. But when he reached the back drawbridge he saw the Xie brothers, inside the gate, throwing the bodies of slain vassals into the flames. He pulled his mount hastily around and sped north. Suddenly, he was confronted by Li Kui. Black Whirlwind bounded towards him, whirling his axes and cutting the animal's legs from under it. The Dragon fell helplessly to the ground. With one swing Li Kui split his skull open.

When these happenings were reported to Tiger Cub, he didn't dare return. He hurried to the Hu Family Manor. On the orders of Hu Cheng, vassals seized and bound him. As they were taking him to deliver him to Song Jiang, they met Li Kui, who cut off Tiger Cub's head with a single sweep of his ax. The vassals fled and Li Kui charged towards Hu Cheng. Obviously, it was a bad situation. Hu Cheng raced his steed into the wilderness. Abandoning his home, he rode for his life. He finally took refuge in the prefecture of Yanan. In later years, when order was restored, he became a general.

Black Whirlwind went on killing smoothly. He charged into the Hu Family Manor and slaughtered the old squire and the whole family, young and old. He instructed his men to load the squire's horses with the forty or fifty bundles of loot he collected, then put the manor to the torch and started back with his prizes.

Song Jiang was by then seated in the hall of the Zhu Family Manor, listening to the reports of his chieftains' achievements. They had captured nearly five hundred men and an equal number of good horses, in addition to innumerable cattle and sheep.

Song Jiang was very pleased, although when he thought of Luan Tingyu he sighed regretfully. “What a pity that gallant fellow was killed.”

A brigand entered and announced: “Black Whirlwind has burned down the Hu Family Manor and cut off their heads. He's returned to present his booty.”

“But Hu Cheng had already surrendered. Who told him to kill those people? Why has he burned their manor?”

Stained with blood, his two axes stuck in his sash, Li Kui entered and hailed Song Jiang respectfully. “I've killed the Dragon and cut down the Tiger Cub,” he said. “That lout Hu Cheng got away, but I made a clean sweep of Squire Hu and the entire family. I've come to be commended.”

“People saw you kill the Dragon, but why did you kill the others?” demanded Song Jiang.

“I got into the swing of it. I was heading for the Hu Family Manor when I ran into Tiger Cub, brother of that Ten Feet of Steel. I finished him off with one chop. Too bad that oaf Hu Cheng got away But I killed every single person in his manor.”

“You rogue! Who told you to go there? You knew that Hu Cheng came with gifts of cattle and wine the other day and surrendered. Why didn't you listen to me? Why did you take it on yourself to kill his whole family in deliberate violation of my order?”

“Maybe you've forgotten, but I haven't. He also sent his friggin woman to kill you the other day, yet now you're all sympathetic! You're not engaged to his sister. Why should you care about her brother and father?”

“Iron Ox, you're raving! What would I want with her? I have something else in mind. How many live ones have you taken, you swarthy devil?”

“Who's got the patience? Any live one I met, I cut down.”

“You've disobeyed my orders. That's a beheading offence! It wipes out the credit you deserve for killing the Dragon and the Tiger Cub. The next time you violate an order I won't forgive you!”

Black Whirlwind grinned. “So I don't get any credit. But all that killing was a real pleasure.”

Military Advisor Wu Yong was seen approaching with a company of mounted men. On reaching the manor they drank to Song Hang and congratulated him. Song Jiang conferred with Wu Yong. He wanted to annihilate the village attached to the manor. But Shi Xiu reminded him of the old man who had been of such help in telling the secret of the paths.

“There are many good people like him in the village. They shouldn't be harmed.”

Song Jiang instructed Shi Xiu to fetch the old man. Not long after, Shi Xiu brought him to the manor. The oldster kowtowed to Song and Wu Yong. Song Jiang rewarded him with silks and a bag of gold and told him he could remain in the village permanently.

“If it weren't for your kindness we would have obliterated your village,” Song Jiang said, “and every family in it. But now, thanks to your meritorious conduct, they all shall be spared.”

The old man could only kowtow again.

“I've been worried about you ordinary folk for several days,” Song Jiang continued. “Today, we've taken the Zhu Family Manor and rid you of an oppressor. Each family shall receive a load of rice, as a sign of our concern.”

He put the Old man in charge of distribution. At the same time, he had the manor's surplus grain loaded onto carts. Gold and silver and other valuables he gave as rewards to the leaders and men of his forces. All cattle, sheep, donkeys, horses, and the like were driven off for use in the mountain fortress.

As a result of the capture of the Zhu Family Manor, the brigands obtained five hundred thousand loads of grain. Song Jiang was very pleased.

The chieftains big and small assembled their fighters. Several new leaders were added: Sun Li, Sun Xin, Xie Zhen, Xie Bao, Zou Yuan, Zou Run, Yue Ho and Mistress Gu. Seven gallant men had been rescued.

Sun Li, with his own horses and the valuables he had brought from home, took his wife Mistress Yue and followed the main force up the mountain. Local villagers, supporting the old and carrying small children, burned incense and lit festive lanterns, kowtowed and gave thanks, as they saw them off.

Song Jiang and the leaders mounted. The army, divided into three contingents, marched through the night on the return trip to the mountain stronghold.

We'll speak now of Li Ying the Heaven Soaring Eagle who had been resting and recovering from his arrow wound. He kept the gates of the manor closed and did not go out, but he frequently sent men in secret to get news of the Zhu Family Manor. He was both startled and glad to learn that Song Jiang had conquered it.

A vassal entered and reported: “The prefect has come with forty or fifty men to inquire about the Zhu Family Manor.”

Li Ying hurriedly ordered Du Xing to open the gate, lower the drawbridge and escort them in. He bound his injured arm in white silk and went out to welcome his callers and invite them into the main hall. The prefect dismounted, entered the hall, and seated himself in the center. His clerk sat by his side. Next were two sheriffs and several captains. At the foot of the platform were many bailiffs and prison guards. Li Ying kowtowed to the prefect and stood before him.

“The slaughter of the Zhu Family, how did that come about?” the prefect demanded.

“Their son the Dragon wounded me in the left arm with an arrow. I've kept my gates closed and have not ventured out. I have no knowledge of the affair.”

“Lies! A complain accuses you of complicity with the Liangshan Marsh bandits. You lured out the Zhu forces so that the bandits could break into

the manor. The other day you received from them saddle horses, sheep, wine, silks, gold and silver. How can you deny it?”

“I'm a law-abiding man. I'd never accept their gifts.”

“I can't believe that. I'm taking you to the prefecture. There, you can confront your accuser and have this out.”

At a word from the prefect, the guards seized Li Ying, and the sheriffs and captains tied his arms. The entourage swarmed around the prefect as he mounted his horse.

“Who is the steward Du Xing?” asked the prefect.

“I am that humble person,” said Du.

“Your name is also in the complaint. Take him along.”

Du was promptly fettered. The party left the manor. With Li Ying and Du Xing under restraint, they marched without halt along the road.

Before they had gone thirty *li*, Song Jiang, Lin Chong, Hua Rong, Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu suddenly emerged from the edge of the forest and blocked their way. “The gallants of Liangshan Marsh are here together,” shouted Lin Chong.

The prefect and his party didn't dare put up a fight. Abandoning Li Ying and Du Xing, they fled. “After them,” yelled Song Jiang. Brigands pursued them for a while, then returned.

“We'd have killed that friggin prefect if we'd caught up with him,” they reported, “but he got away.”

They untied the ropes and opened the fetters on Li Ying and Du Xing, and led forward two horses for them to ride.

“Won't you come and take refuge in our Liangshan Marsh for a time, sir?” said Song Jiang.

“I can't do that,” said Li Ying. “You're the ones who tried to kill the prefect. It has nothing to do with me.”

Song Jiang smiled. “Do you think the authorities would accept such an argument? Even if we went off without you, you'd still be implicated. You're not willing to become an outlaw, but at least stay in our mountain fortress a few days. As soon as we hear you're in no danger, you can come down again.”

Li Ying and Du Xing had no choice, surrounded as they were by a whole army. Divided into three contingents, the force wound its way to Mount Liangshan.

Chao Gai and the others, beating drums and blowing flutes, came down the mountain to welcome them with wine. All repaired to Fraternity Hall and seated themselves fanwise.

Li Ying was introduced to the leaders. After courtesies had been exchanged, he said to Song Jiang: “Du Xing and I have seen you back to your stronghold, General, and have met the leaders. I don't mind staying here for a time, but I'm concerned about my family. I'd like to go down and see.”

Wu Yong laughed. “No need, sir. Your family is already here. And your manor has been burned to the ground. What would you go back for?”

Li Ying looked sceptical, until he saw carts and people advancing up the path. They were vassals from his manor and members of his family. He hastened to them.

His wife said: “After you were taken by the prefect, two sheriffs came with four constables and a patrol of three hundred soldiers. They wrapped our belongings into bundles and made us get into carts. They took along all our hampers and livestock, and put the manor to the torch.”

Li Ying uttered a cry of lamentation. Chao Gai and Song Jiang apologized. “The truth is that we have long heard of your excellence,” they said, “and so we evolved this scheme. We beg your forgiveness.”

Since they put it that way, Li Ying had no choice but to comply.

“Please ask your family to rest in a wing of the rear hall,” said Song Jiang.

Li Ying observed that many of the chieftains had their wives and children with them. He told his spouse: “We can only obey him.”

Song Jiang then invited Li to the front part of the hall for a chat. Everyone was pleased. In a jocular tone, Song said to Li Ying: “I'd like you to meet the two patrol sheriffs and the prefect.”

Out stepped Xiao Rang, disguised as the prefect, and Dai Zong and Yang Lin, who had assumed the roles of the sheriffs. Pei Xuan had been the clerk, Jin Dajian and Hou Jian had been the captains. Song Jiang also summoned the four constables. They were Li Jun, Zhang Shun, Ma Lin, and Bai Sheng.

Li Ying gaped at them, speechless.

Song Jiang instructed the lesser chieftains to slaughter cows and horses quickly for a feast both of apology to Li Ying and of celebration over the addition of twelve new leaders: Li Ying, Sun Li, Sun Xin, Xie Zhen, Xie Bao, Zou Yuan, Zou Run, Du Xing, Yue Ho, Shi Qian, Ten Feet of Steel and Mistress Gu. The women leaders had a table of their own in the rear hall with Mistress Yue and the female members of Li Ying's family.

All brigands, large and small, were rewarded, and merry pipes and drums sounded in the hall. The bold fellows drank and dined until late. When the festivities ended, the new leaders retired to the quarters assigned to them.

The chieftains were invited to another feast the following day to seek their aid in another matter. Song Jiang called forth Stumpy Tiger Wang and said: “When we were on Clear Winds Mountain I promised you a wife. I haven't forgotten, but I haven't yet fulfilled my pledge. Today, my father has a daughter he'll give to you in marriage.”

Song Jiang requested Squire Song to bring the Hu Family girl to the feast.

“My brother Wang Ying is a good fighter. Of course, his skill can't be compared with yours,” Song said to her apologetically. “But I've promised him a bride, and I still haven't produced one. You, sister, are now my father's ward. I'd like all these leaders to serve as match-makers and give you in marriage to Wang Ying. Today is an auspicious day.”

Ten Feet of Steel saw how deeply Song Jiang felt his chivalrous obligations. She was unable to refuse. The bride and groom kowtowed their thanks. Chao Gai and the other leaders were pleased. They all praised Song Jiang for his virtue and loyalty. Everyone feasted the entire day, and many toasts were drunk in congratulations.

In the midst of the merrymaking, a messenger came up the mountain and reported: “There is a man from Yuncheng Town in Zhu Gui's inn. He requests to see you leaders.”

Chao Gai and Song Jiang were delighted when they learned who it was. “If we can persuade our benefactor to join our band we will have achieved the wish of a lifetime,” they said.

Truly, he who cannot distinguish between gratitude and hatred is no real hero. He who cannot tell black from white is no genuine stalwart. Who, then, was the man who had come from Yuncheng? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 51
Winged Tiger Brains Bai Xiuying with His Rack
Beautiful Beard Loses the Prefect's Little Son

“A band of travellers were passing the forest along the highway when our men stopped them,” said the messenger. “One is Constable Lei Heng from Yuncheng Town. Chieftain Zhu Gui has invited him to the inn, where he is now being wined and dined. I was sent to report.”

Chao Gai and Song Jiang were overjoyed. Together with Wu Yong, they went down the mountain. Zhu Gui had already ferried their guest to the Shore of Golden Sands. Song Jiang hastily kowtowed.

“It's been a long time since we parted,” he said. “I've thought of you often. What brings you to our humble abode?”

Lei Heng returned the courtesy. “I was sent on official business by my local county to the prefecture of Dongchang. On the way back, I was stopped at the crossroads by bandits who demanded passage money. When I mentioned my name, brother Zhu Gui insisted that I stay with him for a while.”

“A Heaven-sent good fortune!”

Song Jiang invited Lei Heng to the fortress, introduced him to the leaders, and feted him with wine. For five days, they met and chatted every day. Chao Gai inquired after Zhu Tong.

“He's now the warden of our county jail,” said Lei Heng. “The new magistrate is very fond of him.”

Song Jiang brought the conversation around to Lei Heng joining the band. But the constable said: “My mother is very old. I can't abandon her. I'll join you after she's lived out her final years.”

He kowtowed and bid them farewell. Try as he might, Song Jiang could not persuade him to remain. The other leaders presented him with precious gifts, as did, of course, Song Jiang and Chao Gai.

Lei Heng went down the mountain with a large bundle of gold and silver. The leaders saw him off to the foot of the road. There he was ferried across to the highway and returned to Yuncheng. Of that no more need be said.

As to Chao Gai and Song Jiang, on coming back to Fraternity Hall they requested Wu Yong, military advisor of the stronghold, to determine the assignments of the various leaders. Wu Yong consulted with Song Jiang and, the following day, all were summoned to hear the dispositions. The first were those in the inns on the outer perimeter.

“Sun Xin and Mistress Gu were tavern-keepers originally,” said Song Jiang. “We're instructing them to replace Tong Wei and Tong Meng, for whom we

have another use. Shi Qian shall help Shi Yong, Yue Ho shall help Zhu Gui, Zheng Tianshou shall help LiLi. Thus, we will have taverns to the north, east, south and west, each selling wine and meat, and each with two chieftains, to receive bold fellows from all over. Ten Feet of Steel and Stumpy Tiger Wang shall hold the lower part of the rear mountain and look after the horses. The small fort at the Shore of Golden Sands shall be commanded by the brothers Tong Wei and Tong Meng. The small fort at Duck's Bill Shore shall be held by uncle and nephew Zou Yuan and Zou Run. The road in front of the mountain shall be guarded by a troop of cavalry under Huang Xin and Yan Shun. Xie Zhen and Xie Bao shall hold the first pass in the front of the mountain, Du Qian and Song Wan the second, Liu Tang and Mu Hong the third. The three Ruan brothers shall guard the water fortifications on the south side. Meng Kang shall continue to be in charge of boat building. Li Ying, Du Xing and Jiang Jing shall supervise all money, grain, and gold. Tao Zongwang and Xue Yong shall control building and repair of rampart walls and terraces. Hou Jian shall govern the making of clothes, armor, banners and military garments. Zhu Fu and Song Qing shall arrange the feasts. Mu Chun and Li Yun shall build the housing and the palisades. Xiao Ran and Jin Dajian shall deal with all correspondence and documents regarding guests. Pei Xuan shall head the legal department, and dispense rewards and punishments. Lu Fang, Guo Sheng, Sun Li, Ou Peng, Ma Lin, Deng Fei, Yang Lin and Bai Sheng shall control the stronghold's various hostels. Chao Gai, Song Jiang and Wu Yong will live on the summit in the center, Hua Rung and Qing Ming will live to the left, Lin Chong and Dai Zong will live to the right—all within the fortress. Li Jun and Li Kui will live on the front of the mountain, Zhang Heng and Zhang Shun on the rear. Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu will protect both sides of Fraternity Hall.”

The assignments having been made, one chieftain, was feasted each successive day. The organization of the mountain fortress was now tight and efficient.

After leaving Liangshan Marsh, Lei Heng, shouldering his pack and carrying his halberd, made tracks for Yuncheng. At home he saw his mother

and changed his clothes. Taking the official reply, he called on the magistrate in the county office, reported verbally, and handed over the various documents and endorsements. Then he returned home to rest.

As usual he signed in and checked out at the county office every day, while awaiting a new assignment. He was walking down a street one day when a voice hailed him from behind.

“When did you get back, Constable?”

Lei Heng turned around. It was an idler known as Li the Second.

“Only a couple of days ago.”

“You were gone for quite a while. Maybe you haven't heard. A travelling singer has come from the Eastern Capital. She's beautiful and talented. Her name is Bai Xiuying. The wench called to see you but you were out on a mission. She's performing at the theater now. She sings all kinds of ditties. They put on a variety show every day there —dancing, music, and singing. The place is jammed. Why don't you go and have a look? She's a delicious little actress.”

Lei Heng, having nothing better to do, went to the theater with Li the Second.

Placards in letters of gold had been put up all around the entrance, and from a flagpole a vertical banner hung down almost to the ground. They went in and took the first seats on the left. A preliminary-act comedian was performing on stage. Li left Lei Heng in the crowd and slipped out for a drink.

After the comedian finished an old man came out. He wore a bandanna covering his forehead, a tea-colored silk gown bound by a black waist sash, and carried a fan.

“Bai Yuqiao from the Eastern Capital, that's me. I rely in my old age on my daughter Xiuying, who sings and dances and plays musical instruments. We travel all over and entertain.”

A gong crashed and the girl came on stage. She bowed in each direction. She plied her stick against the gong with such rapidity that it sounded like scattering peas. Then she cut it short with one sharp blow and recited:

Twittering fledglings soar as old birds return,

Gaunt grow the old sheep while lambkins wax fat,

Men struggle a lifetime for clothing and food,

But lovebirds fly freely to where pleasure is at.

Lei Heng shouted his applause.

“Next on my program,” said the girl, “is a romantic story called: 'A Love Pursues in Yuzhang City.'“ She spoke a few words and began to sing, alternately talking and singing while the audience in the mat-awning-covered courtyard roared approvingly.

Just as Xiuying reached the climax of the tale, the old man interrupted.

“'Though not such a skill as earns horses and gold, it moves men of intelligence,”' he averred. “You gentlemen have applauded. Now, daughter, come down. The next act is rattling the drum with money...”

The girl took up a platter, pointed at it, and chanted: *“I'll go to the rich, halt where there's gain, pass when I'm lucky, and head for prosperity.* When I place this before you, don't let it go away empty.”

“Walk among them, daughter. Which one of you gentlemen will start us off?”

Holding the platter, the girl approached Lei Heng. The constable groped in his purse. He hadn't a penny.

“I forgot my money today. I'll bring you some tomorrow.”

Xiuying laughed. '“If the first brew of vinegar isn't strong, the second is sure to be even flatter.' Sitting in a front seat, you ought to set a good example.”

Lei Heng reddened. “I didn't bring any money. It's not that I'm unwilling.”

“You remembered to come to hear me sing, sir. Why didn't you remember your money?”

“I could give you four or five ounces of silver. It means nothing to me. Unfortunately I forgot to bring any.”

“You haven't a penny in your pocket, and you talk grandly of four or five pieces of silver! Do you expect me to 'Slake my thirst looking at a sour plum' or 'Assuage my hunger with a drawing of a muffin'?”

“Have you no eyes, daughter?” Bai Yuqiao called. “Can't you tell the difference between a city man and a rube? Don't waste your time on him. Ask some kind gentlemen who has a little sense to start us off.”

“Are you saying I haven't any sense?” Lei Heng demanded.

“If you know how a polished scholar should act, a dog's head can sprout horns!” the old man retorted.

A noisy stir ran through the audience. Lei Heng grew angry.

“You cheap lackey! How dare you insult me!”

“Does it matter what I say to a cowherd like you?”

Someone in the audience recognized Lei Heng, and he cried: “Stop talking like that. He's our county's Constable Lei.”

“Did you say 'constable' or 'constipated'?” Yuqiao sneered.

Lei Heng couldn't contain himself. He leaped from his chair onto the stage and seized the old man. With one punch and one kick he puffed up his lips and knocked out a couple of teeth. The attack was fierce, and others rushed to separate them. Lei Heng was persuaded to go home, and the audience hastily departed.

Now it happened that the singer had been intimate with the new magistrate when he was still in the Eastern Capital, and this was one of the reasons she had brought her show to Yuncheng. After Lei Heng gave here father such a drubbing, she called a sedan-chair and went directly to the magistrate.

“Lei Heng beat up my father and drove out my audience. He's deliberately abusing me.”

“Draw up a complaint, immediately,” the magistrate heatedly exclaimed, in a clear demonstration of the influence of “pillow power.” He also examined the old man's injuries and had these noted as evidence.

Lei Heng had friends in the county office, and they tried to intercede for him. But they couldn't prevail against the girl. She refused to leave, and pouted and flounced until the magistrate had to give in. Lei Heng was arrested, brought before the court, beaten till he confessed, collared with a rack, and an order issued that he be paraded in the streets. At the girl's insistence, the magistrate instructed that Lei Heng be put on display at the theater door.

The next day, when Xiuying went to perform, Lei Heng stood by the entrance way. The guards were public servants like Lei Heng himself, and they were reluctant to strip him, as this type of punishment required. The girl thought: “I've already come out against him openly. Why fear to infuriate him further?”

She went to a nearby tea-house, sat down, and called the guards over. “You're all closely connected, so you go easy on him,” she said. “The magistrate ordered you to display Lei Heng, bound and stripped, but you're too full of sympathy. Just wait till I tell the magistrate! We'll see whether I can cope with you or not!”

“Don't lost your temper, madam. If we have to, we'll strip him.”

“In that case, I'll reward you.”

The guards had no choice but to remove Lei Heng's clothes there on the street. “We can't help ourselves, brother,” they said apologetically.

During this turmoil, Lei Heng's mother arrived, bringing him food. She saw him standing there, naked, and she started to cry.

“You work in the magistrate's office, just like my son,” she berated the guards. “Is it worth the money she gave you to act like this? You might get into trouble yourself, some day.”

“Listen, old mother, we wanted to do the right thing. But the complainant came to see the 'bound and stripped' sentence enforced, and we couldn't refuse. She threatened to make things hot for us with the magistrate. So we couldn't save face for Lei Heng.”

“Who ever heard of a complainant seeing to it in person that a sentence is carried out?”

A guard lowered his voice. “She's very close to the magistrate, old mother. One word from her and we're sent up. That's why we're in such a fix.”

The old woman began opening Lei Heng's bonds. “That slut knows how to use her connections. I'm going to untie this rope. Let's see what she can do about it.”

Xiuying, in the tea-house, heard all this. She walked over. “What did you just say, old baggage?”

Lei Heng's mother pointed at her angrily. “You've been mounted and pressed by thousands, you screw for any man who comes along, you bitch! What right have you to swear at me?”

Xiuying's willow tendril eyebrows contracted, her starry eyes glared. “Old bawd,” she screamed. “Beggar woman! How dare a low person like you curse me?”

“What are you going to do about it? You're not the magistrate of Yuncheng!”

The actress rushed up and with one push sent the old woman staggering. Before she could steady herself, Xiuying closed in and slapped her left and right.

Lei Heng, a filial son, was enraged. He raised his rack and brought it down on Xiuying's head. A corner of it struck her squarely and split open her skull. She collapsed to the ground, her brain matter flowing, her eyes bulging, absolutely motionless. Plainly, she was dead.

The others at once brought Lei Heng to the magistrate and reported. The magistrate directed that Lei Heng be taken to the scene under guard, together with county officials, the district chief and witnesses, and that an examination of the body be conducted. This done, all returned to the court, where Lei Heng freely confessed. His mother, under surety to appear, was ordered to return home and await further instructions. Lei Heng, a rack around his neck, was committed to prison.

The warden of the prison was Zhu Tong the Beautiful Beard. When Lei Heng was delivered, he couldn't do much for him. But he treated him to wine and food, and instructed a guard to sweep out and prepare a clean cell. Not long after, Lei Heng's mother also brought food.

Weeping, she said to Zhu Tong: “I'm over sixty, and this child is everything to me. You two have been such friends. Have pity and look after him.”

“Don't worry, old mother. You needn't bring him food any more. I'll take care of everything. If I can find the chance, I'll save him.”

“Do that and you'll be like my parents reborn! If anything should happen to him, it would be the end of me!”

“I'll remember. You can rest assured.”

The old woman thanked him and left.

Zhu Tong tried to think of a way to rescue Lei Heng, but in vain. He asked someone to intercede with the magistrate, and spread bribes among high and low. The magistrate was very fond of Zhu Tong, but he hated Lei Heng for having killed his paramour, and was deaf to all pleas. What's more, the old scoundrel Bai Yuqiao flooded the magistracy with petitions that Lei Heng pay for his daughter's life with his own. And so, after sixty days of detention, Lei Heng was ordered committed to the prison in Jizhou Prefecture. The record scribe was sent on ahead with the relevant documents, and Zhu Tong was directed to deliver the prisoner there under armed escort.

Zhu Tong selected a dozen guards and left Yuncheng with Lei Heng. After marching ten *li* they came to a tavern.

“Let's have a few bowls of wine,” Zhu Tong suggested.

Everyone went into the tavern and drank. Zhu Tong took Lei Heng out in the back, as if they were going to relieve themselves. In a secluded spot, he opened the rack and freed him.

“Go home, brother, quickly, and get your mother. Travel all night, find refuge. I'll take the consequences.”

“I don't mind fleeing, but you'll be implicated.”

“Brother, you don't know. The magistrate is furious that you've killed his doxy. You're under sentence of death. If you went to the prefecture, they'd surely execute you. Letting you go isn't a capital offense. I have no parents to worry about. It doesn't matter if all my property is confiscated in recompense. Go as far as you can, and quickly.”

Lei Heng kowtowed his thanks. He hurried home along a path from the rear door. He gathered his valuables and departed with his mother. They travelled through the night to Liangshan Marsh, where he joined the band. Of that no more need be said.

Zhu Tong buried the rack in the deep grass. He emerged and shouted: “Lei Heng has escaped'. This is terrible!”

“We'll chase him to his home and bring him back,” exclaimed the guards.

Zhu Tong delayed them to give Lei Heng time to go a long distance, then returned to the county office.

“I was careless,” he confessed. “The prisoner got away on the road. We searched without success. I'm willing to accept any punishment.”

The magistrate liked Zhu Tong very much. He would have preferred to let him off. But Bai Yuqiao threatened to go to a higher court and accuse Zhu Tong of deliberately letting Lei Heng escape. The magistrate had no choice but to report the matter to the prefecture of Jizhou. Zhu Tong's family immediately sent someone there who spread bribes around liberally. When the constable was remanded to Jizhou the prefect knew all about it. He imposed a sentence of twenty blows, and ordered that Zhu Tong be committed to the prison in the prefecture of Cangzhou.

Zhu Tong, a rack for travelling around his neck, set out with two guards carrying the relevant documents. Members of his family gave him clothing and money, after tipping the guards. On leaving Yuncheng, the party followed a winding road to Henghai County in Cangzhou Prefecture. The trip was uneventful.

The prefect was holding court when the guards delivered the documents and their prisoner. He could see that Zhu Tong, with his ruddy face and handsome beard extending down past his middle, was no ordinary person. Favorably impressed, the prefect said: “Don't take this man to prison. I want him here in the prefecture as my attendant.”

The rack was removed, a reply was written, and the two guards took their leave and returned to Yuncheng.

From then on Zhu Tong served in the prefectural office. He dispensed a certain amount of largesse among the sheriffs, captains, keepers of the

gates, messengers, jailors and guards. Since he had an amiable disposition as well, he was liked by all.

One day the prefect was sitting in his court. Zhu Tong stood below in attendance. Summoning him forward, the prefect asked: “Why did you let Lei Heng go and end up here?”

“I would never have dared to do that. It's just that I was careless, and he escaped.”

“Did you really deserve such a severe punishment?”

“The complainant in the original case insisted that I confess to having released him. So the sentence had to be severe.”

“Why did Lei Heng kill that singer?”

Zhu Tong explained the circumstances in detail.

“Then you considered him filial and thought letting him go was the only chivalrous thing to do?”

“Would I have had the temerity to deceive the authorities?”

Just then, from behind a screen, the prefect's little son came out. Only four years old, he was a pretty child, and the prefect loved him better than gold or jade. The boy went directly to Zhu Tong and asked to be picked up. Zhu Tong held him in his arms, and the child grabbed his long beard.

“I want this bearded fellow to carry me. No one else,” piped the little boy.

“Let go of him,” said the prefect. “Behave yourself.”

“I want him to carry me. I want him to take me out to play.”

“I'll take him outside for a stroll,” Zhu Tong suggested. “We'll be back soon.”

“All right,” said the prefect. “Since that's what he wants.”

Zhu Tong carried the child to the street and bought him some good sweets. After a short while, he brought him back.

“Where did you go?” the prefect asked the little boy.

“This bearded fellow took me on the street to play. And he bought me sweets and fruit.”

“You shouldn't have spent your own money,” the prefect said to Zhu Tong politely.

“Only a small token of my esteem,” said Zhu Tong. “It's not worth mentioning.”

The prefect ordered wine for the constable. A serving girl brought a silver pitcher and platter and poured Zhu Tong three large beakers of wine in succession.

“Any time the child wants you to take him to play, you can carry him out for a walk.”

“Your wish is my command, Excellency.”

Thereafter, Zhu Tong took the little boy for a stroll every day. He had money in his purse and he wanted the prefect to be pleased, so he spent it on the child freely.

Half a month went by, and it was the fifteenth day of the seventh month—the Driving Out of Devils Festival. Glowing lanterns were set afloat upon the river, and people prayed and did good deeds. That evening, the nursemaid spoke to Zhu Tong.

“The child wants to see the river lanterns, Constable. Madam, his mother, says you can take him.”

Zhu Tong promised he would. The little boy was dressed in a green silk robe, and short strings of beads were tied to the two tufts of hair sticking up like horns on the top of his head. Zhu Tong carried him on his shoulder as

they left the gate of the prefectural compound and walked towards the temple. Lighted lanterns were sailing upon the water.

It was early evening. Zhu Tong strolled around the temple grounds with the little boy. People were earning blessings by setting live fish free in a special pool. The child climbed on a railing overlooking the river and watched happily as the lanterns floated by. A man behind Zhu Tong tugged him by the sleeve.

“Brother, would you come away a moment so we can talk?”

Zhu Tong looked around. To his surprise, there was Lei Heng.

“Get off that railing and sit here,” Zhu Tong said to the child. “I'm going to buy you some candy. Don't leave this spot.”

“Come back quickly. I want to watch the river lanterns from the bridge.”

“I'll only be a minute.” He turned and went off with Lei Heng.

“What are you doing here?” Zhu Tong asked.

Lei Heng pulled him into a secluded corner and said: “After you saved me, I had HO Other place to go with my old mother, so I joined Song Jiang's band in Liangshan Marsh. I told them of your benevolence, and Song recalled your kindness to him in previous days. Chao Gai and the other leaders were extremely moved. They sent me and Military Advisor Wu Yong to see you.”

“Where is Teacher Wu?”

A man stepped out from behind him. “Wu Yong is here.” He kowtowed.

Zhu Tong hastily returned the courtesy. “It's been a long time, Teacher,” he said. “I trust all has been well with you?”

“Our stronghold leaders send their respects. They've deputed Constable Lei Heng and me to invite you up our mountain to join our righteous assembly. Though many days have passed, we haven't dared to approach you. Tonight,

we meet at last. Please come with us to our fortress and satisfy the wish of our highest chieftains, Chao Gai and Song Jiang.”

For some time Zhu Tong was unable to answer. Finally, he said: “Teacher, you're making a mistake. You mustn't ask me that. Suppose we were overheard? Brother Lei Heng committed a death-penalty crime. Out of chivalry I allowed him to escape. He could no longer let himself be seen, so he went up the mountain and joined your band. Because of him, I've been exiled here. But if Heaven is merciful, in another year or so I'll be able to go home and become a respectable citizen again. Why should I do the sort of thing you propose? Please go back, both of you. Staying here, you may cause misunderstanding.”

“But, brother, you're only an attendant, here,” Lei Heng argued. “That's no job for a real man. It's not only me who wants you to join us. Our highest chieftains have both been hoping to see you for a long time. What will they think if you delay?”

“Brother, what are you saying? You haven't thought. I let you escape because your mother was old and your family poor. Now you suggest I'm lacking in chivalry.”

Wu Yong interceded. “Since the constable doesn't want to go, we shall bid farewell and leave.”

“Please give my humble regards to the chieftains,” said Zhu Tong. They walked together towards the bridge.

There was no sign of the little boy. Zhu Tong groaned. He searched high and low. Lei Heng grasped his arm.

“Don't bother looking, brother. Probably the two men who came with us, when they heard you say you wouldn't go, took the child away. We'll go find them, together.”

“This is no time for jokes. That little boy is the prefect's very life. I'm responsible for him.”

“Brother, just come with me.”

Zhu Tong, Lei Heng and Wu Yong left the temple and went outside the city. Zhu Tong was quite upset.

“Where have they gone with the child?” he demanded.

“We'll go to my place, brother,” said Lei Heng. “I'll return him to you.”

“The prefect will be angry if I get back late.”

“Those two who came with us are ignorant fellows,” said Wu Yong. “They must have taken him to where we're living.”

“What's their names?” asked Zhu Tong.

“I don't know them,” said Lei Heng. “I heard one of them being called Black Whirlwind.”

Zhu Tong was shocked. “Not the fellow who killed those people in Jiangzhou?”

“That's the man,” said Wu Yong.

Zhu Tong stamped his feet in anguish and groaned, then hurried on. When they were about twenty *li* from the city, they saw Li Kui the Black Whirlwind ahead.

“Here I am,” called the big fellow.

Zhu Tong hastened up to him. “Where is the prefect's son?”

Li Kui hailed him respectfully. “Greetings, brother Warden. The child is here.”

“Bring him out, then, and give him to me.”

Li Kui pointed to his own hair. “I'm wearing his bead decorations.”

Zhu Tong looked, and demanded in alarm: “Where is he now?”

“I put a drug in his mouth and carried him from the city. He's sleeping in that grove. Please see for yourself.”

It was a bright moonlit night, and Zhu Tong plunged in among the trees. He saw the little boy lying dead on the ground.

Zhu Tong rushed out the grove, enraged. The three men were gone. He peered in every direction. Then he saw Black Whirlwind standing in the distance. The big man smote his battle-axes.

“Come on. Come on,” he cried.

Wild with fury, Zhu Tong hitched up his robe and tore after him. Li Kui continued retreating, with Zhu Tong in pursuit. But what chance had he to catch up with the experienced mountain traveller? Soon he was gasping for breath.

Ahead of him, Li Kui called again: “Come on. Come on.”

The seething Zhu Tong wanted to swallow him down in one gulp. But he couldn't get near him. The chase dragged on through the night. Gradually, the sky brightened. Li Kui moved faster when Zhu Tong speeded up, slower when he lagged, and not at all when he halted. Zhu Tong saw him enter a large manor.

“The rogue has gone to ground at last,” thought the constable. “Now I can have it out with him.”

He hurried into the courtyard and halted in front of a large hall. In racks on either side were many weapons. “This must be some big official's residence,” he thought. He called: “Is anyone at home?”

A man emerged from behind a screen. And who was it? None other than Chai Jin the Small Whirlwind.

“Who are you?” Chai Jin enquired.

When Zhu Tong saw this handsome and graceful lord, he bowed and replied: “My name is Zhu Tong. I was warden of the Yucheng prison. But I committed a crime and was exiled here. Last night I took the little son of the prefect to watch the lantern floating on the river, and Black Whirlwind killed him. He's here now in your manor. May I trouble you to help me seize him and turn him over to the authorities?”

“Since you are Beautiful Beard, please be seated.”

“May I beg to ask your name, my lord?”

“I'm Chai Jin, and am called the Small Whirlwind.”

“I've long known of your great name.” Zhu Tong kowtowed. “I didn't expect to have the honor of meeting you today.”

“Your name has also been long known to me, sir. Please come into the rear hall where we can talk.”

As he followed Lord Chai inside Zhu Tong asked: “How does that scoundrel Black Whirlwind dare to hide in your manor?”

“That's easy. I have always welcomed bold men of the gallant fraternity. An ancestor of mine gave up the throne, and because of that the first Song emperor bestowed on my ancestors the Wrought Iron Pledge. When a wrongdoer takes refuge with us, no searchers dare enter. A dear friend of mine knows you well. He's one of the leaders in Liangshan Marsh—Song Jiang, called the Timely Rain. He wrote a secret letter instructing Wu Yong, Lei Heng and Black Whirlwind to stay here at my place and invite you to go with them up the mountain and join the band. Since you couldn't be persuaded, Song ordered Li Kui to kill the prefect's son, to cut off any chance of you returning to the city, and thus compelling you to go to the stronghold and assume a chair of leadership. Teacher Wu, brother Lei, aren't you coming out to apologize?”

The two men emerged from an anteroom and kowtowed before Zhu Tong. “Forgive us, brother,” they said. “We were acting on brother Song Jiang's orders. If you go with us to the fortress, you'll understand.”

“I know you brothers meant well, but your methods were too cruel!”

Chai Jin murmured soothing words.

“I'll go if I have to, but I want to see Black Whirlwind first!”

“Brother Li,” the lord called. “Come out and apologize.”

Li Kui walked from a side room and voiced loudly a respectful greeting. The sight of him sent flames spurting thirty thousand feet high in Zhu Tong's heart. He couldn't control his rage. He rushed towards Li Kui murderously. It took the combined efforts of Chai Jin, Lei Heng and Wu Yong to restrain him.

“I'll go up the mountain,” said Zhu Tong. “But first you have to promise me one thing.”

“Not one but scores, if you so desire,” said Wu Yong. “What is it you wish?”

And because of Zhu Tong's request, there was turmoil in Gaotang Prefecture and strife in the Liangshan Marsh stronghold. A noble patron of learning fell into the clutches of the law, a hospitable relative of the emperor was cast into a dungeon.

What was the demand which Zhu Tong made? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 52
Li Kui Beats to Death Yin Tianxi
Chai Jin Is Trapped in Gaotang Prefecture

“If you want me to go up the mountain,” said Zhu Tong, “you must kill Black Whirlwind to appease my rage! Then I'll go.”

“You can eat my prick,” roared Li Kui. “I was carrying out the orders of brothers Chao and Song! It hadn't a tooting fart to do with me!”

Zhu Tong moved to throw himself on Li Kui. The other three restrained him. “If Black Whirlwind is there, I'll never go up that mountain,” Zhou Tong vowed.

“That's easy,” said Chai Jin. “I'll keep him here with me. You three go on to the stronghold and satisfy the wishes of Chao and Song.”

“The prefect is sure to send a warrant for my arrest to Yuncheng County. They'll take my wife and children. How can we deal with that?”

“Don't worry,” said Wu Yong. “Song Jiang has probably brought your family into the fortress by now.”

Only then did Zhu Tong relax. Chai Jin treated his guests to wine, and the same day saw them off. They left towards evening. Lord Chai provided them with three riding horses and an escort of vassals. He accompanied them to the outside of the pass. At the final parting, Wu Yong gave *f-* Li Kui some words of advice.

“Behave with care. Stay a while in the lord's manor. Don't stir up any trouble and get him involved. In a few months or half a year, after Zhu Tong has cooled down, we'll bring you back to the fortress. We'll probably invite Lord Chai to join us, too.”

The three mounted and departed. Chai Jin and Li Kui returned to the manor. Zhu Tong went with Wu Yong and Lei Heng to become a member of the band in Liangshan Marsh. When they came to the end of Cangzhou Prefecture, the vassals rode the horses back, and the three continued on foot.

The journey was uneventful, and they soon reached the tavern ran by Zhu Gui. He sent word to the stronghold of their arrival. Chao Gai and Song Jiang, accompanied by greater and lesser chieftains, were waiting to greet them on the Shore of Golden Sands, to the beat of drums and the shrilling of flutes. All got on their horses and climbed to the fortress, where they dismounted and went to Fraternity Hall. They talked for a while of old times together. Then Zhu Tong voiced his apprehension.

“You've called me to the mountain, but the prefect of Cangzhou is certain to notify Yuncheng County to seize my wife and children. What can I do?”

Song Jiang laughed. “Set your mind at ease, brother. We sent men to fetch them several days ago.”

“Where are they now?”

“They're resting at the place of my father the squire. Why not go and see for yourself?”

Zhu Tong was delighted. Song Jiang led him to his father's villa. Zhu Tong was reunited with his family. He observed that they had brought all their valuables.

“A man came with a letter the other day saying you had already joined the mountain band,” his wife related. “So we packed our belongings and travelled through the night to get here.”

Zhu Tong kowtowed and thanked the brigand leaders. Song Jiang asked both him and Lei Heng to make their homes on the mountain summit. For successive days he gave feasts in their honor, as new chieftains. Of that no more need be said.

The prefect of Cangzhou, when it began getting late and Zhu Tong didn't return with his son, sent people out to look for them. They searched half the night. The next day, someone found the body in the grove, and notified the prefectural office. Shocked, the prefect went to the grove. He wept as though his heart would break. He had the body encoffined, and cremated it.

Summoning court the following morning, he issued notices for the arrest of Zhu Tong to all the surrounding areas. Yuncheng County reported that Zhu Tong's wife and family had fled to places unknown. Rewards for Zhu Tong's apprehension were offered in the various prefectures and counties. Of that we'll say no more.

When Li Kui had been with Lord Chai for over a month, a messenger delivered an urgent letter to the manor. Chai Jin accepted and read it. He was astonished.

“In that case I'll have to go,” he exclaimed.

“What's the trouble, Excellency?” asked Li Kui.

“I have an uncle, Chai Huangcheng, who lives in Gaotang Prefecture. That rogue Yin Tianxi, brother-in-law of the prefect, Gao Lian, has taken over his garden. My uncle is so infuriated that he's fallen ill, and he may not live. He must have some dying words he wants to impart. My uncle has no children. I'll have to hurry to his side.”

“Would you like me to keep you company?”

“I'd be glad if you're willing to go.”

Chai Jin packed some luggage, selected a dozen good horses, and told a number of vassals to get ready. The next day at dawn Lord Chai, Li Kui and their company climbed into their saddles, left the manor and headed for Gaotang.

They arrived in less than a day and dismounted in front of the residence of Chai Huangcheng. Chai Jin left Li Kui and the others in the outer hall and went to his uncle's bedroom. Seated beside Huangcheng's bed, he wept. The lady his uncle had married after the death of his first wife came in.

“You've had a tiring ride,” she said. “You mustn't upset yourself.”

Chai Jin greeted her courteously and asked what had happened.

“The new prefect, Gao Lian, is also the military commander here,” she said. “Because Marshal Gao in the Eastern Capital is his cousin, he feels he can do anything he pleases. He brought with him his brother-in-law Yin Tianxi. Everybody calls him Counsellor Yin. Although quite young, Yin knows he has the prefect's backing, and he hurts people with his outrageous behavior. One of his toadies told him that we have a pretty rear garden with a pavilion

overlooking a pool. He broke in with twenty or thirty scamps one day, examined the garden, and wanted to drive us out of our home and move in himself.

“Your uncle Huangcheng said to him: 'Our family is of noble origin. An earlier emperor bestowed a Wrought Iron Pledge on our family that no one may oppress us. How dare you seize my home? Where is my wife and family supposed to go?'

“The knave wouldn't listen. He insisted that we leave. Your uncle tried to push him away, and was beaten for his pains. He's been in bed ever since. He can't get up and he can't eat. Medicine doesn't seem to do any good. Heaven may be far but the grave for him is near, I'd say. Fortunately, you've come to take charge. So even if the worst should happen, we won't have to worry.”

“Don't despair, aunt. We'll get a good doctor to treat him. If there's any dispute about this, I'll send a man back to Cangzhou to get the Wrought Iron Pledge, and show that to Yin. If we have to go before the authorities, or even the emperor himself, we have nothing to fear.”

“Huangcheng failed in all his efforts,” said his wife. “But I'm sure, in your hands, we'll get results.”

Chai Jin stayed a while with his uncle, then came out and told Li Kui and the others about the dispute. Li Kui jumped to his feet.

“That unreasonable varlet! I'll give him a couple of licks with my axes first, then we can start discussions'.”

“Calm yourself, brother Li. You can't get rough with him without any provocation. Besides, although he may have powerful backing, our family is protected by the Pledge. If he won't listen to reason here, in the capital there are persons just as influential as he, and the law is clear. We'll fight him in court.”

“The law, the law! If everyone obeyed the law, everything would be serene! I'm in favor of hitting him first and talking afterwards. If he complains to

the court, I'll hack him and the friggin judge together!”

Chai Jin laughed. “No wonder Zhu Tong wanted to fight you. You're both such hotheads. This is an imperial city, not your mountain stronghold where you can act as you like.”

“So what? Jiangzhou and Wuweijun are also imperial cities. Didn't I kill men there too?”

“Wait till I've seen how the land lies. When the need arises, I'll ask your help, brother. Until that happens, please remain here quietly.”

At that moment a servant hurried out to request Lord Chai to go to his uncle. Chai Jin went quickly to the bedside. His uncle spoke to him with tears in his eyes.

“You're a man of high principle, nephew, a credit to our ancestors. I die today because of the humiliation imposed on me by Yin Tianxi. You owe it to me as one of the same flesh and blood to write a complaint to the emperor and obtain redress. From beneath the Nine Springs of the Nether World I will thank you. Take care of yourself. I have no other bequests.”

Having spoken, Huangcheng died. Chai Jin wept bitterly. His aunt feared he would faint. “Restrain your grief,” she urged. “We must talk about the funeral arrangements.”

“The Wrought Iron Pledge is in my home. I haven't brought it. But I'll send a man for it immediately. If necessary, I'll file a complaint in the Eastern Capital. But uncle has passed away. First we must proceed with the encoffining and dress in mourning. We'll confer about other things later.”

Chai Jin ordered that inner and outer coffins be prepared in the official manner, and that a memorial tablet be set up in keeping with the rites. The whole family dressed in deep mourning, and young and old lamented. Li Kui, outside, heard their weeping. Angrily, he ground a fist into the palm of his hand. But when he asked the servants what was going on, no one would tell him. Monks were invited to conduct the prayers.

Two days went by. Riding a spirited horse, Yin Tianxi and twenty or thirty cronies had been carousing outside the city, amusing themselves with slingshots, crossbows, blowpipes, inflated balls, stick branches for catching birds, and musical instruments. Now, pretending to be drunker than they actually were, they staggered up to the residence of Chai Huangcheng. Yin reined in his horse and shouted a demand to see the person in charge.

Chai Jin, wearing mourning, hastily emerged. Yin addressed him from his saddle.

“What part of the family are you?”

“I'm Chai Jin, the nephew.”

“I gave orders the other day that they were to move out. Why haven't I been obeyed?”

“Uncle was sick in bed. We couldn't disturb him. He died in the night. We'll move when the forty-nine day mourning period is over.”

“Farts! I give you three days more. If you're not out by then, I'll put a rack around your neck and let you taste a hundred blows of my staff!”

“You mustn't persecute us like this, Counsellor. We're descendants of a royal family, and protected by an old imperial Wrought Iron Pledge. It must be respected.”

“Take it out and let me see it,” Yin shouted.

“It's in my home in Cangzhou. I've already sent for it.”

“The rascal's lying,” Yin said angrily. “Even if there is such an edict, it doesn't scare me. Men, give this fellow a drubbing!”

The gang started toward Chai Jin. Li Kui, the Black Whirlwind, had been watching and listening through a crack in the door of the house. Now he pushed it open, dashed up to Yin with a roar, dragged him from his horse, and with one punch knocked him sprawling. The thirty ruffians rushed to

Yin's aid. Li Kui promptly flattened half a dozen. Yelling, they all turned and fled.

Li Kui picked Yin up and pummelled him with fist and foot. Chai Jin couldn't restrain him. It wasn't long before Yin was lying dead on the ground.

Chai Jin groaned. He led Li Kui to the rear hall and said: “They'll be sending men here very soon! You can't stay! I'll deal with the prosecution. You've got to go back to Liangshan Marsh, quickly.”

“I can go, but you'll be implicated.”

“The imperial Pledge will protect me. You must go at once. There's no time to lose.”

Li Kui gathered his battle-axes, took some travel money, left through the rear gate, and set out for the mountain fortress.

Not long after, more than two hundred men, armed with swords, spears and staves, surrounded the residence. Chai Jin came out and said: “I'll go with you to the authorities and explain.”

They bound his arms and went in to look for the culprit, a big swarthy fellow. He was gone. They took Chai Jin to the prefecture court, where he knelt in the center of the hall. Gao Lian, the prefect, had ground his teeth in venomous rage when he heard that his brother-in-law had been beaten to death, and had been waiting for the assailant to be brought in. Now, Chai Jin was flung down at the foot of the prefect's dais.

“How dare you kill my Yin Tianxi?” Gao shouted.

“I am a direct descendant of Emperor Shi Zong. My family has a Wrought Iron Pledge of imperial protection from Tai Zu, the first emperor of Song. It's in my home in Cangzhou,” Chai Jin replied. “I called to visit my uncle Chai Huangcheng, who was gravely ill. Unfortunately, he died, and we are now in mourning at his residence. Counsellor Yin came with thirty men and wanted to drive us out. He wouldn't listen to my explanations and ordered

his men to beat me. One of my vassals, Big Li, while defending me, killed him in the heat of battle."

"Where is Big Li?"

"He panicked and ran away."

"He's your vassal. Would he have dared kill a man without orders from you? You deliberately let him escape, and now you try to delude this court. Rascals like you never confess unless they are beaten. Take him, guards, and give it to him hard!"

"To save his master my vassal Big Li accidentally killed a man. It's not my fault. We have Emperor Tai Zu's Pledge. Am I to be beaten like a common criminal?"

"Where is the Pledge?"

"In Cangzhou. I've already sent for it."

"The scoundrel is opposing this court," Gao Lian raged. "Beat him, guards, with all your strength!"

They pounded Chai Jin till his flesh was a pulp and his blood streamed in rivulets. He was forced to confess: "I ordered my vassal Big Li to kill Yin Tianxi." A twenty-five-catty rack for the condemned was placed around his neck, and he was cast into prison. Yin's body, after inspection by the medical examiner, was put into a coffin and buried. Of that no more need be said.

Yin's sister wanted vengeance. She had her prefect husband confiscate the property of Chai Huangcheng, arrest the members of his family, and take over for themselves the house and gardens of the residence. Chai Jin languished in jail.

Li Kui travelled through the night to get back to Liangshan Marsh. On arriving at the fortress he reported to the leaders. Zhu Tong was filled with

rage the moment he saw him. He rushed at Li Kui with his halberd. Black Whirlwind, brandishing his axes, clashed with him in combat. Chao Gai, Song Jiang and the others exhorted them to stop. Song apologized to Zhu Tong.

“Killing the prefect's little boy wasn't Li Kui's idea. Military Advisor Wu Yong thought of this device when you wouldn't agree to joining us. Now that you are here, forget it. Let's all strive together in harmony and loyalty. We don't want outsiders to laugh at us.”

Song Jiang turned to Li Kui. “Tell sir Beautiful Beard you're sorry.”

Li Kui glared. “A fine business. I've done plenty for this stronghold. He hasn't done a thing. Why should I tell him I'm sorry?”

“Although it was the Military Advisor's order, you did kill the prefect's son. From the point of view of age, Zhu Tong is your older brother. Kowtow to him, for my sake. Then I'll kowtow to you, and that'll be the end of it.”

Li Kui couldn't very well refuse. To Zhu Tong he said: “I'm not afraid of you, but brother Song Jiang insists. I can't help myself. I apologize.” He threw his axes aside and kowtowed, twice.

Only then was Zhu Tong appeased. Chao Gai ordered that a feast be laid to cement the reconciliation.

“Lord Chai went to Gaotang because his uncle, Chai Huangcheng, was ill. The prefect's brother-in-law, Yin Tianxi, wanted to take over the house and gardens, and cursed Chai Jin. I knocked the lout around and killed him,” said Li Kui.

“You escaped, but they're sure to prosecute Lord Chai,” Song Jiang cried in alarm.

“Calm yourself, brother,” said Wu Yong. “We'll know more about it when Dai Zong returns.”

“Where has brother Dai Zong gone?” asked Li Kui.

“I thought you'd only stir up trouble, hanging around Lord Chai's manor,” said Wu Yong, “and I sent Dai Zong to bring you back. If he found you were gone, he'd surely follow you to Gaotang.”

Before the words were out of his mouth, a scout entered and announced: “Superintendent Dai has returned.”

Song Jiang went forward to welcome him. After Dai came into the hall and was seated, he was asked for news of Lord Chai.

“I went to his manor and learned that he and Li Kui had left for Gaotang. I hurried after them. In Gaotang, the whole city was agog. Everyone said:' Yin Tianxi tried to seize the residence of Chai Huangcheng, and a big dark fellow beat him to death. Lord Chai was implicated, and tied up and cast into prison. All the property of Chai Huangcheng's family has been confiscated. There's no guarantee that Lord Chai's life will be preserved.”

“That swarthy rogue has done it again,” said Chao Gai. “Wherever he goes, there's turmoil.”

“Chai Huangcheng was beaten by Yin, and he died of rage. Then Yin came to take over his residence and ordered his men to beat Lord Chai. Even if he were a living Buddha, I wouldn't let him get away with it!” Li Kui retorted.

“Lord Chai has always been benevolent to our fortress,” said Chao Gai. “Today, he's in danger. We must rescue him. I'll go personally.”

“You're the highest leader here, brother, you shouldn't make a move lightly,” said Song Jiang. “I've long been indebted to Lord Chai. Let me go on your behalf.”

“Although Gaotang is a small city, it's densely populated, has a large military force, and plenty of grain. We mustn't underestimate it,” said Wu Yong. “I propose that we ask twelve chieftains to lead a vanguard of five thousand men, with a supporting force of three thousand under ten chieftains.”

The twenty-two chieftains bid farewell to Chao Gai and the others and left the mountain stronghold for Gaotang.

By the time the vanguard force reached the edge of the prefecture, Gao Lian had already been informed by his scouts. “I'd been intending to clean out that lair of shabby bandits in Liangshan Marsh,” he sneered, “and now they present themselves to be tied. A Heaven-blessed chance.” He directed his aides: “Transmit my order immediately to muster our army, go forth from the city, and engage the enemy. Let the citizenry man the walls.”

On horseback Gao was military commandant, afoot he was the prefect. As soon as his order was issued, all his officers, from generals to sergeants, assembled their units and inspected them on the drill fields, then marched out of the city against the foe. Gao Lian had a personal contingent of three hundred crack troops known as the “Flying Miracles,” who came from Shandong, Hebei, Jiangxi, Hunan, north and south of the Huai, and east and west of the Zhejiang River. Shouting, banners waving, drums pounding, gongs crashing, they waited only their adversaries' approach.

With the arrival of the five thousand men under Lin Chong, Hua Rong and Qin Ming, the two hosts confronted each other, drams and banners plainly visible, each temporarily halted by powerful flights of arrows. Trumpets blared, and the big battle drums throbbed.

Hua Rong, Qin Ming and the ten other chieftains reined in their horses at the most advanced position. Lin Chong, his serpent lance at the ready, spurred his mount forward.

“Gao the thief,” he yelled. “Come out, quickly!”

Gao Lian gave his animal its head. With thirty officers he rode to the arch of pennants. There, they halted. Gao pointed at Lin Chong.

“Death-deserving rebel brigands! Dare you disturb our city?”

“People-harming crook,” shouted Lin Chong. “One of these days I'm going to the Eastern Capital and pulverize your scoundrelly relative Gao Qiu, that thievish minister who deceives the emperor! I won't rest until I do!”

Gao Lian turned fuming to his cohorts. “Who will ride out and seize this robber?”

From among the officers emerged a captain named Yu Zhi. He clapped his steed and advanced brandishing his sabre. Lin Chong galloped towards him. They had fought less than five rounds when Lin Chong ran his serpent lance through the man's chest and brought him tumbling to the ground.

Gao was startled. “Who will get our revenge?”

Another captain, Wen Wenbao, holding a long lance, astride a sleek brown horse with equipage of tinkling bells and clinking jade, was already racing towards Lin Chong, his animal's hoofs churning a cloud of dust.

“Rest a while, brother,” cried Qin Ming. “Watch me cut this varlet down.”

Lin Chong reined his mount, retracted his steel lance, and allowed Qin Ming to go ahead. The two battled more than ten rounds. Qin Ming deliberately left himself open. As Wen lunged and missed, Qin swung his mace and stove in the captain's skull. Wen collapsed at his horse's hoofs, and the frightened animal scampered back to the defenders' position. From both sides rose a mighty roar.

Gao Lian, having lost two of his officers, drew from its sheath upon his back his precious Dragon Sword. He muttered an incantation, then shouted: “Speed.” And from the midst of his army a black mist rolled. Soon it covered half the sky. Sand flew, stones rolled, the earth quaked, the heavens shook. A weird gale swept across the field against the brigands. Lin Chong, Qin Ming, Hua Rong and the others couldn't see. Terrified horses whinnied and bolted. The fighters turned and fled.

Gao Lian waved his sword. His three hundred Miracle soldiers charged, followed by his entire army. Lin Chong's forces scattered in disorder, exclaiming piteously. Of the five thousand, more than a thousand were destroyed. For fifty *li* they retreated, and finally made camp. The rout complete, Gao Lian returned with his army to the city.

When Song Jiang's contingent reached the camp, Lin Chong and the others told them what had happened. Song Jiang and Wu Yong were shocked.

“What magic can it be,” they wondered, “that is so potent?”

“Probably some evil spell,” Wu Yong averred. “If we knew how to turn back the wind and fire, we could defeat them.”

Song Jiang opened his Heavenly Books. In the third volume he found the necessary formula. Delighted, he memorized the words of the incantation. Then he reorganized his ranks. At the fifth watch they breakfasted. Banners flying, drums pounding, they marched rapidly towards the city.

This was reported to Gao Lian, who again mustered his victorious troops and his three hundred Miracle soldiers. He opened the gates, let down the drawbridge and deployed his men in battle positions.

Song Jiang, sword in hand, rode to the front. He could see a bevy of black pennants in the midst of Gao Lian's army.

“Those soldiers are his so-called 'Spellbinders',” said Wu Yong. “He's probably going to work some magic again. How are you going to cope with him?”

“Don't worry. I have an antidote. Let none of you have any fear or doubt. Just concentrate on plunging into the fray.”

Gao Lian, to his officers, said: “Avoid clashes and combat. But when I bang on my shield, rush together in strength and grab Song Jiang. I will reward you well, personally.”

He hung on his saddle a bronze shield emblazoned with heraldic emblems of dragon and phoenix. Shouts rose from the opposing armies, as he rode forward, holding his sword. Song Jiang pointed his finger at him.

“I couldn't get here last night and my brothers carelessly took some casualties. Today I'm going to wipe all of you out, completely!”

“Dismount, you rebellious brigands, and let yourselves be bound,” Gao shouted back. “I don't want to have to soil my hands with your blood!”

He waved his sword, whispered a few word under his breath, then yelled: “Speed!”

A dark miasma appeared, and was driven by a strange wind towards Song Jiang and his forces. Before it could reach them, Song muttered an incantation and twisted the fingers of his left hand into a cabalistic sign. With his right hand he pointed his sword.

“Speed!” he shouted.

The wind reversed itself and blew back towards Gao's position. Song Jiang was about to order his men to charge. Gao quickly raised his bronze shield and beat on it with his sword. His Miracle soldiers were at once concealed in a Swirling cloud of yellow sand. From his army hordes of monstrous animals and poisonous serpents poured forth.

Song Jiang and his men were scared stiff. Throwing away his sword, Song pulled his horse around and fled. His officers crowded together and ran for their lives. His troops rushed away, every man for himself.

Again Gao Lian brandished his sword. With his Miracle soldiers in the lead, and followed by the rest of his forces, his entire army launched a murderous assault. Song Jiang's men were severely defeated. Gao Lian chased them for more than twenty *li*. Then gongs were beaten as a signal for his soldiers to re-assemble, and they returned to the city.

At a hillock Song Jiang reined in his horse and pitched camp. Although his men had suffered heavy losses, fortunately all of his chieftains survived. When his forces were settled he conferred with Military Advisor Wu Yong.

“We've been vanquished twice in our attack on Gaotang. We can't seem to break his Miracle soldiers. What are we going to do?”

“Since the rogue can work spells, he's sure to raid our camp tonight,” said Wu Yong. “We must plan our defense. We'll leave a small contingent here,

and the rest of us will go back to our original encampment."

Song Jiang ordered that only Yang Lin and Bai Sheng and certain men remain. The others returned to the old camp and rested.

Yang and Bai led their fighters half a ft behind the hillock and hid themselves in the deep grass. At the first watch a gale rose and thunder crashed. From their place of concealment Yang and Bai and their three hundred men saw Gao Lian advancing on foot, followed by his three hundred Miracle soldiers. Howling and whistling, they rushed savagely into the camp. They found it was empty, and started to leave.

Yang and Bai let out a yell. Gao and his Miracle soldiers, fearing a trap, scattered and ran. The brigands winged random volleys after them with their bows. An arrow struck Gao Lian in the left shoulder. The fighters spread out and pursued, killing as they raced through a pouring rain.

By then Gao Lian and his Miracle soldiers were far away. Yang and Bai had only a limited contingent. They dared not go any deeper into enemy territory. Abruptly, the rain stopped, the clouds vanished and the stars came out. In the light of the moon, the brigands collected twenty enemy wounded, who had been felled before the hillock by blade and arrow, and led them to Song Jiang's camp. They told of the strange thunderstorm.

Song Jiang and Wu Yong listened in consternation. "That was only five *li* away, but we didn't have any wind or rain here," they said.

Everyone discussed it. "Truly magic," they agreed. "It rained only in the place, and from a height of just three or four hundred feet. The clouds must have picked up water from nearby ponds."

"Gao Lian charged into our camp carrying a sword and with hair unbound," Yang Lin related. "I hit him with an arrow, and he returned to the city. I didn't go after him because we hadn't enough men."

Song Jiang rewarded Yang Lin and Bai Sheng. He had the wounded prisoners executed. He set up seven or eight small strong points around the main camp and assigned a chieftain to each, as a precaution against an

enemy raid. He also sent a messenger back to the mountain fortress for reinforcements.

Gao Lian, in the city, nursed his wound. “Defend the city,” he instructed his army. “Be constantly on the alert. But don't get involved in any battles. When I've recovered there will be time enough to capture Song Jiang.”

After the defeat inflicted upon him, Song Jiang brooded. He said to Wu Yong: “We can't seem to lick Gao Lian. Suppose he gets more troops from somewhere and they attack in force. How will we be able to withstand them?”

“There's only one way to counter his magic,” said Wu Yong. He spoke softly in Song's ear. “If we don't get that person to help, we may not be able to save Lord Chai, and we'll never take the city.”

Truly, to dispel the magic clouds and mists a person had to be found who understood the secrets of Heaven and Earth. Who, then, was the man Wu Yong proposed? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 53
Dai Zong Seeks Gongsun Sheng a Second Time
Li Kui Splits the Skull of Luo the Sage

“If we are to break Gao Lian's spells,” Wu Yong said to Song Jiang, “we must send a man immediately to fetch Gongsun Sheng.”

“The last time Dai Zong went, he spent many days, but all his inquiries failed,” said Song Jiang. “Where can he look for him now?”

“The prefecture of Jizhou has numerous counties, towns and villages under its jurisdiction. He'd never find him in such places. It seems to me that since Gongsun is a Taoist, he's more likely to live on some famous mountain where there are Taoist caves and retreats. We'll ask Dai Zong to search in the mountainous regions of Jizhou. He'll surely find him.” Song Jiang summoned Dai Zong and explained what was wanted.

“I'll go,” said Dai. “But it would be better if I had a companion.”

“When you use your magic travel method, who can keep up with you?” said Wu Yong.

“I'll put some charms on his legs too, and he'll be able march swiftly.”

“Let me be your companion,” Li Kui requested.

“If you want to travel with me, you must eat only vegetarian dishes on the road and obey my commands.”

“No problem. I'll do whatever you say.”

“Behave yourself and don't cause any rows,” Song and Wu cautioned him. “Return quickly, once you've found Gongsun.”

“Because I killed Yin Tianxi, Lord Chai is being prosecuted. Don't I want to save him? I wouldn't stir up any trouble.”

The two emissaries concealed weapons on their persons, tied their luggage, bid a respectful farewell to Song Jiang and the others, left Gaotang and set out for Jizhou. When they had walked about thirty *li*, Black Whirlwind halted.

“Let's have a bowl of wine before going on, brother.”

“You can only have vegetables with your drink during the magic travel..”

“What difference would a little meat make?” Li Kui said, laughing.

“There you go again. It's getting late. We'll find an inn for the night, and continue on in the morning.”

They walked another thirty *li*, until it was dusk, and put up at an inn. They made a fire, cooked rice and bought some wine. Li Kui carried a bowl of vegetables and another bowl of vegetable soup into the room, where he joined Dai Zong.

“Why aren't you having any rice?” Dai asked.

“I don't feel like it.”

Dai Zong thought: “That rogue must be fooling me and eating meat behind my back.” He finished his own vegetable dish and went softly to the rear. There was Li Kui with two measures of wine, wolfing down a platter of beef. “I knew it,” Dai said to himself. “I won't say anything, but tomorrow I'll have a little fun with him.” He went back to their room and slept.

Li Kui finished off the meat and wine. Afraid that Dai might question him, he returned quietly and went to bed.

At dawn Dai awakened and told Li to light a fire. They cooked a few vegetables for breakfast, then put their luggage on their backs, paid the bill and left the inn.

Before they had gone twenty *li,* Dai said: “We didn't use our magic method yesterday, but today we have to make time. Tie your bundles on tight. I'm going to work the magic on you. We'll be covering eight hundred *li* before we rest.”

He attached four charms to Li Kui's legs and said: “Wait for me at the tavern up ahead.” He muttered an incantation and blew on Li's legs. Black Whirlwind strode off. He flew as if he were riding a cloud. Dai Zong laughed. “I'll keep him hungry all day.” He affixed charms to his own legs, and followed.

Li Kui didn't understand this magic, and he walked as usual with a free stride. At once the sound in his ears was like the rush of wind and rain, the houses and trees on either side seemed to fall backwards as he passed, his feet felt propelled by cloud and mist. He grew frightened and tried to stop several times. But his legs refused to halt. It was as if someone were pushing them. They moved without touching the ground. Taverns selling meat and wine continued to fly towards his rear. He couldn't buy anything.

“My old grandpa,” he swore. “Let me stop a minute!”

Soon the red sun was level in the west. Li Kui was hungry and thirsty. But he still was unable to halt. Drenched in a foul sweat, he panted for breath.

Dai Zong narrowed the gap between them.

“Brother Li,” he called, “why don't you buy a snack to eat?”

“Save me brother,” Li Kui bawled. “I'm dying of hunger!”

Dai Zong pulled a few wheat cakes out of his tunic and commenced to munch.

“I can't stop. How can I buy anything?” Li Kui yelled. “Give me a couple of cakes to take the edge off my appetite.”

“I will, if you'll only stand still.”

Li Kui extended his hand back, but his reach was short by about ten feet. “Good brother,” he cried. “Let's stop!”

“It's very peculiar today. I can't halt my legs either.”

“Aiya. My friggin legs won't listen to me. They just keep running. If they get me mad I'll take my big ax and cut them off!”

“That's a good idea. Otherwise even by next New Year's day you'll still be running.”

“Good brother, you're making fun of me. If I chop my legs off, how will I be able to get back?”

“You probably didn't obey me last night. Now even I can't halt. Well, you can just keep going.”

“My lord and master, forgive me and let me stop!”

“With my magic you can't eat meat, especially beef. If you eat one slice of beef, you have to run until you die.”

“That's terrible! I deceived you last night, brother. I secretly bought six or seven catties of beef and ate them all! What am I going to do?”

“No wonder even my legs can't be halted. You're going to be the death of me.”

Li Kui bawled his laments to the heavens. Dai Zong laughed.

“Promise me one thing and I'll remove the spell.”

“Ask me quickly, master, you'll see how I obey!”

“Will you deceive me and eat any more meat?”

“If I do, may a boil as big as a bowl grow on my tongue! I saw you sticking to vegetables, but I thought that would be too much of a nuisance, so I tried to fool you. I'll never do it again!”

“In that case, I'll forgive you.”

Dai Zong caught up, and brushed Li Kui's legs with his sleeve. “Stand,” he cried. Li Kui immediately halted. “I'm going on ahead,” said Dai. “You can follow slowly.”

But when Li Kui attempted to step out, he couldn't lift his feet. They felt like cast iron. “Another calamity,” he yelled. “Save me again, brother!”

Dai Zong looked back and laughed. “Did you mean what you just vowed?”

“I respect you like my own father! Would I dare go against your commands?”

“You'll really obey me?” Dai encircled Li Kui's wrist with his hand. “Start,” he ordered. The two easily walked on.

“Have mercy, brother,” Li Kui begged. “Let's rest.”

They found an inn, and entered. When they got to their room, Dai removed the charms and burned a few sheaves of sacrificial money.

“How are you now?” he asked.

Li Kui kneaded his limbs and sighed. “These legs feel like they belong to me again at last.”

Dai told him to order wine and a vegetable meal, and set water on to boil for washing their feet. Afterwards, they retired and slept until dawn. They got up, performed their ablutions and had breakfast. They paid the bill and set forth. When they had gone about thirty *li,* Dai produced the charms.

“I'm only giving you two, today,” he said to Li Kui. “You won't go quite so fast.”

“My honored father, I don't want them!”

“You promised to listen to me. We're on an important mission. I won't play any tricks. But if you don't obey me, I'll immobilize you like I did last night. You'll have to stand right here until I go into Jizhou, find Gongsun, and come back.'*

“Tie them on, tie them on,” Li Kui said hastily.

Dai and Li attached to their legs only two charms each. Dai Zong then spoke the incantation. He held onto Li as they continued their journey. Using this magic, Dai could stop or go whenever he pleased. Li Kui dared not disobey. On the road they consumed nothing but wine and vegetable dishes, resuming their march immediately after.

But we mustn't be too wordy. Travelling by magic means, in less than ten days they were resting at an inn in the outskirts of Jizhou. The following day they entered the city, with Li Kui disguised as Dai Zong's servant. They inquired all day, but could find no one who knew Gongsun Sheng. They returned to the inn and retired.

The next day they explored the small streets and narrow lanes of the city, again without success. Li Kui fumed irritably.

“That beggarly Taoist! What friggin place is he hiding in? When I see him, I'll drag him off by the head to brother Song Jiang!”

Dai Zong frowned. “There you go again. Don't you remember what you suffered last time?”

Li Kui laughed apologetically. “I wouldn't, actually. I was only kidding.”

Dai again berated him. Li dared not reply.

They spent another night at the inn. They rose early the next morning, and searched the villages and towns on the city's perimeter. Whenever they met an old man, Dai greeted him respectfully and asked the whereabouts of Taoist teacher Gongsun Sheng. But none of them knew him, though Dai made dozens of inquiries.

By noon both men were hungry. They went into a noodle shop by the side of the road to buy something to eat. The place was full and all the tables were occupied. The two stood waiting in the aisle.

“If you gentlemen would like some noodles,” a waiter said, “you can sit with that old man.”

Dai Zong saw an old fellow seated alone at a large table. He hailed him respectfully and bowed, then he and Li Kui sat down opposite, side by side. Dai told the waiter to bring four bowls of noodles.

“One for me and three for you,” he said to Li Kui. “That should be enough.”

“Hardly. I could do six without any trouble.”

The waiter grinned. Time passed, and there was no sign of the noodles. Li Kui saw steaming bowls being carried into an inner room, and he began to lose patience. The waiter placed a bowl of hot noodles down before the old man, who tucked in without any ado, bending low over the table to sip.

“Waiter,” the impetuous Li Kui cried angrily, “you're keeping me waiting.” He slammed his fist on the table, bouncing hot soup out of the bowl into the old man's face and spilling the noodles.

Annoyed, the old man grabbed Li Kui. “What right have you to overturn my noodles?” he shouted.

Li Kui clenched his fists and was going to hit him. Dai Zong yelled at him to behave, and apologized on his behalf.

“Don't quarrel with this fellow, old gentleman. I'll buy you another bowl.”

“You don't understand, sir. I've a long way to go. I wanted to have some noodles and get home early to hear a sermon. Delaying my breakfast delays my journey.”

“Where are you from, and who are you going to hear?”

“I'm from Two Fairies Mountain in Jiugong County, which is part of Jizhou Prefecture. I came into town to buy some good incense. I'm on my way back to the mountain to hear Luo the Sage. He's lecturing on 'How to Live Forever'.”

Dai Zong thought: “Could Gongsun Sheng be there, too?” And he asked: “Old gentleman, do you have a Gongsun Sheng in your village?”

“If you asked someone else, sir, you probably wouldn't get any answer. Most people don't know him by that name. He's a neighbor of mine, and he lives alone with his old mother. For a time he was away from home on religious wanderings, and he was called Gongsun the Pure. Now, he's given up his family name altogether, and he's known simply as the Pure Taoist. No one calls him Gongsun Sheng. That was his secular name. They wouldn't know who you meant.”

“This is really a case of 'Wearing out iron shoes seeking in vain, then finding a solution with the greatest of ease'! Old gentleman, how far is Two Fairies Mountain from here? Is the Pure Taoist at home?”

“It's only about forty-five *li* from this county. Pure Taoist is the leading disciple of Luo the Sage. His master would never let him leave.”

Dai was delighted. He urged the waiter to hurry with the noodles, then he ate with the old man. Dai paid the bill, and they left the shop together.

After asking the old man for directions, Dai said: “You go on ahead, old gentleman. I'll join you later. I want to buy some incense and paper money first.”

The old man bid him farewell and departed.

Dai Zong and Li Kui returned to their inn, collected their luggage and bundles, attached the charms, left the inn and set out for Two Fairies Mountain. Using the magic travel method, they covered the forty-five *li* in no time. They asked the way to the mountain on arrival at the county town of Jiugong.

“Go east from here,” their informant said. “It's only five *li.*”

The two followed directions and, sure enough, in less that five *li* they reached the foot of Two Fairies Mountain. There, they met a woodcutter. Dai bowed courteously.

“Could you tell us where the Pure Taoist lives?”

The woodcutter pointed. “Through that mountain pass. There's a little stone bridge right outside his gate.”

The two traversed the pass and saw a dozen thatched buildings surrounded by a low wall. Outside there was a small stone bridge. As they approached it they met a peasant girl coming from the enclosure carrying a basket of fruit. Dai Zong bowed.

“I see you're from the Pure Taoist's home. Is he in, do you know?”

“He's in back, refining cinnabar pills.”

Pleased, Dai softly instructed Li Kui: “Conceal yourself in that thicket. After I've seen him I'll call you.”

Dai Zong went in and looked around. A reed curtain hung in front of the door of a three-room thatched cottage. Dai coughed, and a white-haired old woman emerged. He bowed politely.

“I would like to see the Pure Taoist, old mother.”

“What is your name, sir?”

“Dai Zong, from Shandong Province.”

“My son is away on a religious journey. He hasn't returned yet.”

“We're old friends. I have something important to tell him. Please let me see him.”

“He's not home. You can leave a message, if you wish. You can see him when he comes back.”

“I'll drop in again.”

Dai bid the old woman farewell and returned to Li Kui outside the gate.

“I'll have to use you today. His mother says he's not at home. Go in and ask to see him. If she tells you he's away, start smashing things but don't hurt her. I'll rush in and stop you.”

Li Kui took his pair of axes from his bundle, tucked them in his waist sash, and entered the gate. “Send someone out,” he shouted.

The old woman hastily emerged. “Who is it?” she called. She became frightened when she saw Li Kui glaring at her, and said: “What is it you want, brother?”

“I'm Black Whirlwind from Liangshan Marsh. I'm under orders to invite Gongsun Sheng. Tell him to come out, so we can meet face to face. If he refuses, I'll set this friggin place on fire and burn your home to the ground!” And he shouted: “I want him to come right out!”

“Don't be like that, bold fellow. This isn't Gongsun Sheng's house. My son is called the Pure Taoist.”

“Just tell him to come out. I'll know when I see his friggin face.”

“He's on a religious trip and hasn't returned.”

Li Kui pulled out his big axes and knocked down a wall. The old woman moved forward to stop him.

“If you don't call your son, I'll kill you,” cried Li Kui. He raised his axes.

The old woman collapsed to the ground in terror. Gongsun Sheng emerged from the house, running.

“Don't you dare,” he yelled.

At the same time Dai Zong shouted: “Iron Ox, how can you frighten this old mother?” He helped her to her feet.

Li Kui tossed his axes aside and hailed Gongsun respectfully. “Brother, forgive me. This was the only way to get you out.”

Gongsun first supported his mother into the house, then returned and invited his two visitors into a quiet room and asked them to be seated. “How fortunate you've tracked me down,” he said.

“After you left the mountain, brother,” said Dai Zong. “I sought you in Jizhou, but was unable to discover where you'd gone. So I gathered a band of brothers and went back to the stronghold. Brother Song Jiang recently tried to rescue Lord Chai in Gaotang, but was twice defeated because of magic used by the prefect Gao Lian. He can't cope with it, and has sent me and Li Kui to request your assistance. We searched all Jizhou for you without success. Fortunately, we ran into an old gentleman in a noodle shop who told us where to find you. A village girl said you were at home refining cinnabar, but your old mother insisted you were away. So I asked Li Kui to arouse you into coming out. It was a crude method, and I beg your pardon.

But to brother Song Jiang at Gaotang, every day is like a year. We urge that you go with us and demonstrate your unflagging chivalry."

"I have drifted about since childhood, and have become acquainted with many gallant men. Though I left Liangshan Marsh and returned home, I haven't forgotten you. But my mother is old and has no one to look after her, and my teacher, Luo the Sage, wants me by his side. I was afraid the stronghold would send people looking for me. That's why I changed my name to the Pure Taoist and hid myself here."

"Song Jiang is in danger. Have mercy, brother. You must make this trip."

"My mother has no one to take care of her, and my teacher never would let me go. It's really out of the question."

Dai Zong kowtowed and pleaded. Gongsun raised him to his feet. "We can talk about this later," he said. He served his guests wine and vegetable dishes in the quiet room, and the three ate.

"If you refuse to go, brother," said Dai Zong, "Song Jiang will surely be captured by Gao Lian. The chivalry of our mountain fortress will be ended."

"Let me ask my teacher," said Gongsun. "If he agrees, I'll go with you."

"We'll go to him at once."

"Relax and spend the night here. We can start the first thing in the morning."

"For Song Jiang in his present position each day is like a year. Please, brother, let's go now."

Gongsun led Dai and Li along a road to the Two Fairies Mountain. It was the end of autumn and the beginning of winter. The days were short, the nights long, and it grew dark early. By the time they were halfway up the slope, the red sun was sinking in the west. They followed a path through the dimness of a pine grove to the temple presided over by Luo the Sage. On a

vermilion plaque over the gate inscribed in letters of gold were the words: “Temple of the Purple Void.”

The three straightened their clothes in the Garments Pavilion, then proceeded along a covered walk to the Hall of Pines and Cranes. Two boy novices informed the Sage of their arrival. He ordered that they be invited in. They entered. Luo had just finished his prayers and was seated on a cloud-decorated dais. Gongsun advanced and greeted him, then stood and waited, body bent respectfully. Dai Zong hastily kowtowed. Li Kui only stared.

“Who are these two gentlemen?” Luo asked.

“Brothers of former days I've told you about, Teacher, gallant friends from Shandong. Gao Lian, prefect of Gaotang, has been using magic. Brother Song Jiang has sent these two brothers to ask my help. I wouldn't venture to decide on my own. I've come to ask Teacher's permission.”

“You've escaped the fiery pit of human frailty, you've learned to make longevity pills. Why go back to that life?”

Dai Zong again kowtowed, “Please allow Teacher Gongsun to go with us,” he requested. “After he's broken Gao Lian's spell, we shall escort him back.”

“You two gentlemen don't understand,” said Luo the Sage. “This is not a matter of concern to religious persons. Leave here. Make other plans.”

Gongsun could only lead them away. They left the Hall of Pines and Cranes and went down the mountain the same night.

“What did that old mystic teacher say?” asked Li Kui.

“Why didn't you listen?” said Dai Zong.

“I couldn't understand his gibberish.”

“He said Gongsun couldn't go.”

“We travel all this distance, I'm given a hard time, and we finally find him,” shouted Li Kui, “and all we get is parts! That old thief had better not make me lose my temper or I'll crush his hat with one hand, grab him by the waist with the other, and fling him down the mountain!”

Dai-Zong frowned. “Do you want to be rooted to the spot again?”

Li Kui smiled abashedly. “No, no. I was only joking.”

When they reached Gongsun's home the Taoist prepared some food. He and Dai Zong ate, but Li Kui sat wrapped in thought and didn't touch a morsel.

“Rest here tonight,” said Gongsun, “and tomorrow I'll plead with my teacher again. If he agrees, I'll go with you.”

Dai Zong bid him good night, put his luggage in order, and retired to the quiet room with Li Kui. But Black Whirlwind couldn't sleep. He endured his wakefulness till around the fifth watch, then got up softly. He listened to his companion. Dai Zong was snoring peacefully.

“Are you a friggin craven?” Li Kui mentally addressed Gongsun. “That old man is full of crap! You used to be a member of our stronghold. Why do you need permission from that friggin teacher? Suppose he doesn't agree? Won't that harm brother Song Jiang? I won't stand for it! I'll kill the old rogue! Then Gongsun will have no one to ask, and he'll have to go with us!”

Li Kui groped for his two axes, quietly opened the house door and, step by step in the moonlight, made his way up the mountain. The double portals of the Temple of Purple Void were shut, but the fence around the compound was not high, and he cleared it in a leap. After opening the portals in readiness for a retreat, he crept into the grounds till he came to the Hall of Pines and Cranes. He heard someone within chanting scriptures. He crawled closer and poked a hole through the paper window. Luo the Sage was seated alone on his dais. Two smoking candles on a table before him shed a bright light.

“That wretched Taoist,” thought Li Kui. “He deserves to die.” Stealthily, he crept to the latticed door and, with one push, swung it creaking open. He

charged in, raised his axes and brought them down on the Sage's forehead. Luo collapsed on his dais. His flowing blood was white. Li Kui laughed.

“The varlet must have been a virgin. He's still got all his male essence. He hasn't used any of it! There's not a drop of red blood in him!” Li Kui took a close look at his handiwork. His ax had cleaved the Sage's hat and split his head right down to his neck.

“Today, I've removed a trouble-maker,” Black Whirlwind observed with satisfaction. “We won't have to worry about Gongsun not going.”

Turning, he left the Hall of Pines and Cranes and hurried along the corridor. A young black-clad novice blocked his way.

“You killed our teacher,” the boy yelled. “Don't think you can escape!”

“Little knave,” cried Li Kui. “Have a taste of my axes!”

He chopped, and the boy's head rolled to the foot of the terrace. Li Kui laughed.

“I'd better get out of here.”

He left the temple portals and flew down the mountain. At Gongsun's house he slipped in and closed the door behind him. Once more he listened in the quiet room. Dai Zong was still asleep. Softly, Li Kui returned to bed and slept.

Gongsun rose at daylight and laid out some breakfast. He and Dai Zong ate.

“Please take us up the mountain again so that we may plead with your teacher,” said Dai.

Li Kui bit his lips to keep from laughing.

The three followed the same path and climbed the slope. At the Hall of Pines and Cranes inside the Temple of Purple Void they were met by two novices.

“Is the Sage within?” asked Gongsun.

“He's meditating on his cloud dais,” the boys replied.

Li Kui was astonished. He stuck his tongue so far out in consternation, for a long time he couldn't pull it back. They pushed aside the door curtain and entered. Sure enough, there seated on the dais was Luo the Sage.

“Could I have killed the wrong man last night?” Li Kui wondered. “What brings you three here again?” Luo queried. “We wish to beg your permission for Gongsun our teacher to rescue mercifully many people in distress,” said Dai Zong.

“Who is that big swarthy fellow?”

“A brother in chivalry of mine, Li Kui.”

The Sage laughed. “I was going to refuse Gongsun. But for that dark fellow's sake I'll let him take this one trip.”

Dai Zong kowtowed, and relayed the information to Black Whirlwind.

Li Kui thought: “The rascal knows I wanted to kill him. Why does he make such friggin remarks?”

“I'll send you three immediately to Gaotang,” said Luo. “How will that be?”

They thanked him, and Dai Zong said to himself: “This Sage has much stronger magic than my Miraculous Travel Method.”

Luo directed his novices to bring three handkerchiefs.

Dai asked him: “How are you going to get us to Gaotang so quickly? Please explain.”

The Sage stood up. “Come with me.”

They left the hall and followed him to the top of a bluff. A red kerchief was spread upon the ground.

“Purity, stand on that.”

Gongsun placed both feet on the kerchief. With an upward sweep of his wide sleeve, Luo cried: “Rise!”

The kerchief turned into a red cloud and carried Gongsun high into the air till it was two hundred feet above the mountain.

“Stop,” shouted Luo the Sage, and the red cloud hung suspended.

Next, a blue handkerchief was spread, and Dai Zong was told to stand upon it. At the command, “Rise,” it changed into a blue cloud and soared up till it was at a level with the red. Each the size of a large sleeping mat, the two clouds circled in the heavens. Li Kui stared, open-mouthed.

Luo then had a white kerchief spread upon the bluff top, and he instructed Li Kui to step on.

“This is no joke,” the Black Whirlwind grinned. “If a man fell off he could raise quite a bump on the head!”

“You see those other two, don't you?” said Luo.

Li Kui stood on the kerchief and the Sage shouted: “Rise!” The kerchief changed into a white cloud and started upwards.

“Aiya,” yelled Li Kui, “mine is unsteady! Let me down!”

Luo waved his right hand, and the red and blue clouds smoothly returned to earth. Dai kowtowed his thanks, and stood on Luo's right. Gongsun stood on his left. Above, Li Kui was shouting.

“I have to piss and shit like everyone else! If you don't bring me down, I'll pour it on your head from up here!”

“I'm one who has given up the material world. I've never harmed you. Why did you come over the wall at night and hack me with your axes?” Luo asked. “If I weren't possessed of virtue, you'd have killed me. And you murdered my novice.”

“It wasn't me! You're mistaking me for somebody else!”

The Sage laughed. “Although all you did was chop off a couple of gourds, your intentions were bad. I'm going to make you suffer a bit for that.” He waved his hand. “Go!”

An ugly wind blew Li Kui into the clouds. Two warriors, wearing head kerchiefs of imperial yellow, escorted him under guard. The wind and rain howled in Li Kui's ears. He looked down. Houses and trees seemed to be falling backwards as he passed. His feet felt as if they were being hastened by clouds and mists.

He had no idea how far he had gone. He was scared out of his wits, and was trembling all over. Suddenly, he heard a scraping sound, and found himself rolling down the roof of the main hall of the prefecture of Jizhou.

The magistrate, Ma Shihong, was holding court. Arrayed outside the building were many police and functionaries. When they saw a big swarthy fellow tumbling down from the sky they were very startled.

“Bring that rogue here,” shouted Ma.

A dozen jailors and guards hustled Li Kui forward.

“Where are you from, rascally sorcerer?” demanded the magistrate. “Why have you dropped from the heavens?”

Li Kui, in his fall, had banged his head and split his brow. He was too stunned to speak.

“He must be a wizard,” Ma affirmed. He directed that punishment implements be brought.

Guards and jailors tied Li Kui up and dragged him to the grassy sward before the hall. A captain poured dog's blood on his cranium. Another tipped a bucket of urine and turds and drenched him from head to toe. Li Kui's mouth and ears were full of the stuff.

“I'm not a wizard,” he bawled. “I'm an attendant of Luo the Sage!”

Everyone in Jizhou knew that Luo the Sage was a living spirit on earth. They were reluctant to harm Li Kui any further. They pushed him before the magistrate.

“Luo the Sage is famed for having attained virtue and becoming a living god,” said a functionary. “If this is one of his followers, we mustn't punish him.”

The magistrate laughed. “I've read a thousand books and know ancient and modern history, but I've never heard of a living god who had a disciple like this! He's just an evil sorcerer. Guards, give him a good drubbing!”

They had no choice but to turn him over and beat him till he was more dead than alive.

“Admit you're a wizard, knave,” shouted the magistrate, “and we'll stop.”

Li Kui had no choice but to confess that he was “Wizard Li the Second.” A big rack was nailed around his neck and he was cast into prison. He was put into the section for the condemned.

“I am a spirit general and officer of the day,” he asserted loudly. “How dare you place a rack on me? I'm going to wipe every one of you out in Jizhou Town!”

The guards and warden all knew that the virtue of Luo the Sage was of the highest purity, and they admired him greatly.

“Who are you, really?” they asked Li Kui.

“Officer of the day, spirit general, and intimate of Luo the Sage! I made a mistake and annoyed him, so he flung me here that I might suffer a bit. But he'll be sending for me in two or three days. If you don't serve me meat and wine I'll slaughter you and your whole families!”

The guards and warden were frightened. They bought wine and meat and invited Li Kui to dine. Seeing this, he grew wilder in his speech, which

scared his listeners still more. They brought hot water for him to bathe in, and clean clothing.

“If you stint on wine and meat, I'll fly away,” he threatened. “I'll make you suffer!”

The guards and jailors apologized and entreated. Needless to say, he I remained in the Jizhou prison.

All of this Luo the Sage related to Dai Zong, who pleaded that he spare Li Kui. Luo kept Dai as his guest in the hall and questioned him about activities in the mountain fortress. Dai said that Chao Gai and Song Jiang were chivalrous and charitable, doing only what was morally right, never harming faithful officers of the emperor, noble-hearted men, filial sons, righteous husbands or chaste wives. He told of their many virtues.

Luo was very pleased.

Dai stayed with him for five days, and each day he kowtowed and begged the Sage to save Li Kui.

“Men like that can only be driven away,” said Luo. “Don't take him back with you.”

“You don't understand,” replied Dai. “Li Kui is stupid, he doesn't know the rites, but he has his good points. First of all he's absolutely straight. He'll rarely ask anyone for anything. Secondly, he doesn't flatter people, but when he's loyal it's to the death. Third, he's not lecherous, greedy or treacherous, but brave and bold. For these reasons, Song Jiang loves Li Kui. I wouldn't be able to face brother Song if I went back without him.”

Luo laughed. “I've known for some time that he is one of the stars of Heavenly Spirits. Because many people on earth behave too wickedly, as a punishment to them and him he was sent down to kill them. Would I dare go against the will of Heaven and harm a man like that? I only want to rough him up a little, then you can have him back.”

Dai thanked the Sage, and Luo called: “Are any warriors around?” A wind rose outside the Hall of Pines and Cranes, and when it passed a warrior in a turban of imperial yellow stepped forward and bowed. “What are your orders, Teacher?”

“Bring that man back you escorted to the Jizhou prison. He's paid for his crime. Go and return quickly.”

The warrior respectfully assented. In about half a watch, he dropped Li Kui down from the air. Dai hastily helped him to his feet.

“Where have you been these last couple of days, brother?” he asked.

Li Kui saw Luo the Sage and fervently kowtowed. “My own father, I'll never dare to offend again!”

“You must curb your temper from now on,” said Luo. “Concentrate on serving Song Jiang. Shun all wicked thoughts.”

Li Kui again kowtowed. “You are like my own father! Would I dare disobey your commands?”

“Where did you go these last few days?” Dai pressed him.

“The wind that day blew me to the Jizhou magistrate's office and rolled me down the roof. They all grabbed me and that friggin magistrate said I was a wizard. He had me knocked down and tied up and told his prison guards to pour dog's blood and piss and shit all over me and beat me till my legs were jelly. Then they put a rack on me and threw me into prison.

“'What spirit general are you to come down from heaven like that?' they asked me. 'Personal attendant to Luo the Sage and officer of the day spirit general,' I told them. 'Because I've made some mistakes I have to suffer a bit. But I'll be called for in a couple of days.' Though I was beaten, I got some good food and wine out of it. Those rogues were afraid of the Sage, so they let me bathe and gave me a change of clothes.

“They were wining and dining me just now in a pavilion, when that yellow turbaned warrior jumped down from the sky. He opened my rack and told me to close my eyes. It was like a dream, till I landed back here.”

“The Teacher has over a thousand such warriors,” said Gongsun. “They're all his personal attendants.”

“Living Buddha,” cried Li Kui. “Why didn't you tell me before and save me from making that stupid error?” Again he kowtowed to the Sage.

Dai Zong also kowtowed. “I've been here indeed a long time,” he said. “The military situation at Gaotang is desperate. Please be merciful and let teacher Gongsun go with us and rescue brother Song Jiang. After we've smashed Gao Lian we'll escort him back.”

“I was opposed to letting him go, originally. But because of your lofty loyalty I shall permit him to make the trip. I have something to impart first which you must remember.”

Gongsun came forward and knelt before the Sage to receive his instructions.

Truly, he was filled with desire to save the world and bring tranquility to the land, a man destined for high rank and prestigious position.

What, then, did Luo the Sage say to Gongsun Sheng? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 54
Dragon in the Clouds Defeats Gao Lian by Magic Black Whirlwind Goes Down a Well and Rescues Chai Jin

“Younger brother,” said the Luo the Sage, “the magic you've learned is the same as Gao Lian's. But now I'm going to teach you the Divine Method for Summoning the Five Thunderbolts. With this you can save Song Jiang, defend the country, preserve peace for the people, and act righteously on Heaven's behalf. I will see to it that your old mother is looked after. You

may rest assured. You are one of the stars of Heavenly Spirits. For that reason, I permit you to help Song Jiang. Retain the virtues you have learned. Let no mundane desires lead you astray, lest you be deflected from your important cause."

Gongsun Sheng knelt and received the Method. Then, with Dai Zong and Li Kui, he took leave of the Sage and his Taoist colleagues, went down the mountain and returned home. Collecting his twin swords, his iron helmet, and Taoist cloak, he bid farewell to his mother, and set forth along the road out of the mountains.

When they had travelled thirty or forty *li*, Dai Zong said to Gongsun: "I'll go on ahead and report to Song Jiang. You and Li Kui follow the highway. I'll come back and pick you up."

"Good, you do that," said Gongsun. "We'll move as fast as possible."

"Take care of the Teacher," Dai admonished Li Kui. "If anything goes wrong, I'll make you suffer for it."

"He knows the same magic as Luo the Sage," Black Whirlwind replied. "I wouldn't dare neglect him!"

Dai Zong affixed his charms and, invoking his marvellous travel means, swiftly departed.

Leaving Two Fairies Mountain and Jiugong County behind them, Gongsun and Li Kui pushed on along the main road, resting in inns at nightfall. Black Whirlwind was afraid of the Luo the Sage's magic. He treated Gongsun with the greatest solicitude and kept his impetuosity tightly in check.

On the third day of their journey, they came to a town called Wugang, a populous, busy place.

"These last couple of days have been tiring. Let's have some wine and noodles before going on," Gongsun suggested.

"Fine," said Li Kui.

They saw a small tavern beside the post road and went in. Gongsun sat down at the head of the table. Li Kui undid the pack around his waist and seated himself opposite. They ordered wine and vegetable tidbits.

“Have you any meatless pastries?” Gongsun asked the waiter.

“No, we've only meat and wine here,” said the man. “But there's a shop at the town entrance that sells date cakes.”

“I'll go and buy you some,” Li Kui volunteered. He took copper coins from his purse, headed into town and bought the cakes. Starting back, he heard people in a crowd by the side of the road cry admiringly: “What strength!”

Li Kui looked. They were surrounding a big fellow, watching him manipulate a large ribbed iron mallet. He was tall, his face was pitted with smallpox scars, and there was a large groove in his nose. Li Kui estimated the mallet to weigh about thirty catties. The man swung it and smashed a paving block to bits with a single blow. The crowd cheered. This was more than Li Kui could bear. He shoved the packet of date cakes inside his tunic and reached for the big hammer.

“Who the hell are you, that you dare take my mallet,” the man shouted.

“That's some friggin farce you put on, trying to win applause! It hurts my eyes,” said Li Kui. “I'll show these people how it should be done!”

“Go on, take the hammer. But if you can't wield it, I'll punch your neck!”

Li Kui picked up the mallet and flipped it about as if it were a child's slingshot. He toyed with it for a few minutes, then set it down lightly. He was neither red in the face nor panting, and his heart did not beat fast.

The man dropped to his knees and kowtowed. “I would know your name, big brother.”

“Do you live around here?”

“Just up ahead.” The man led Li Kui to a house and unlocked the door. He invited Li Kui in and asked him to be seated.

Li Kui noted an anvil, hammers, a forge, pincers, awls and pokers. “Must be a blacksmith,” he thought. “We need a man like this in the fortress. Why don't I ask him to join?”

“What's your name?” he queried.

“I'm called Tang Long. My father was a garrison officer in the prefecture of Yanan. Because he was good ironsmith, he served directly under Old General Zhong. He died a few years, ago. I'm mad about gambling, and I've knocked about a lot. I'm here as a blacksmith temporarily only to earn my keep. My real love is play with weapons. Since I'm marked all over with smallpox scars, people call me the Gold-Coin Spotted Leopard. May I ask, brother, what your name is?”

“Li Kui, Black Whirlwind of Liangshan Marsh.”

Tang Long kowtowed twice. “I've heard so much about you. Who'd have thought we'd meet today!”

“You'll never prosper hanging around this place. Come with me to Liangshan and join us. We'll make you a chieftain.”

“If you don't despise me and are willing to take me along, I'll gladly serve as your groom.” He pledged himself to be Li Kui's younger brother, and Black Whirlwind accepted him.

“I have no family to entertain you here,” said Tang Long, “but I can treat you to three cups of simple wine in town to mark our brotherhood. Rest here tonight, and we'll set out tomorrow.”

“There's a teacher in the tavern ahead, waiting for some date cakes I've bought. We have to go as soon as he's eaten. We must leave immediately.”

“What's the hurry?”

“Our brother Song Jiang is involved in a fierce battle on the edge of Gaotang Prefecture. Only this teacher can save him.”

“Who is he?”

“Don't ask. Just get your things together and come.”

Tang Long hastily packed a bag, took silver for travelling expenses, put on a broad-brimmed felt hat, hung a dagger at his waist, and grabbed a halberd. He left his dilapidated home and crude furnishings, and followed Li Kui to Gongsun Sheng in the tavern.

“Where have you been all this time?” the Taoist demanded reproachfully. “I'd have gone back if you kept me waiting much longer.”

Li Kui was afraid to reply. Instead, he introduced Tang Long, and told of their pledge of brotherhood. Gongsun was pleased to learn that he was a blacksmith. Li Kui produced the date cakes and instructed the waiter have them heated. The three downed several cups of wine together, ate the cakes, and paid the bill.

Tang Long and Li Kui shouldered the packs. With Gongsun, they left the town and made their way along a winding road towards Gaotang.

By the time they had covered two thirds of their journey, Dai Zong returned to meet them. Gongsun was delighted.

“How's the battle going?” he asked.

“Gao Lian has recovered from his arrow wound. He marches out with soldiers and challenges us every day. But brother Song Jiang is afraid to engage them. He's waiting for you.”

“It will be easy.”

Li Kui introduced Tang Long to Dai Zong and related what had transpired. The four men hurried on to Gaotang. About five *li* from the brigands' camp they were met by Lu Fang and Guo Sheng leading a hundred cavalrymen. The four mounted and proceeded to the camp.

Song Jiang and Wu Yong were waiting to greet them. Obeisances were exchanged, the travellers were offered wine, politely questioned about their journey, and invited into the headquarters tent. All the chieftains came to

congratulate them on bringing Gongsun, Li Kui introduced Tang Long. When the courtesies were completed, a celebration feast was laid.

The next day Song Jiang, Wu Yong and Gongsun conferred in the tent on how to smash Gao Lian. “Give the order to attack the city,” Gongsun said to Song Jiang. “We'll see what the enemy reaction is. I have a plan.”

Song Jiang transmitted the command to the leaders of each encampment. These led their men to the moat around Gaotang, where they again made camp. At dawn, everyone rose and had breakfast, and the warriors donned their armor. Song Jiang, Wu Yong and Gongsun rode to the fore.

Mid waving banners the men shouted, while the thunder of drums and the bray of gongs beat against the city walls.

During the night an officer had reported to Gao Lian, the prefect, now recovered from his arrow wound, that Song Jiang's forces had arrived. In the morning Gao put on his armor, opened the city gate, lowered the drawbridge, and rode forth with his three hundred Miracle soldiers, plus officers high and low.

When the two armies were in sight of each other's drums and pennants, they spread out in battle position. Intricately carved drums thundered. Beribboned, embroidered banners waved. From Song Jiang's position a V-formation of ten horsemen trotted up. The left wing consisted of Hua Rong, Qin Ming, Zhu Tong, Ou Peng and Lu Fang. In the right wing were Lin Chong, Sun Li, Deng Fei, Ma Lin and Guo Sheng. The three commanding generals rode between them.

On the opposite side, golden drums pounded, and a front row of banners parted to permit the forward passage of Gao Lian, prefect of Gaotang, surrounded by twenty or thirty of his officers. He halted before the banners and hurled imprecations.

“Swamp bandits! Since it's a fight you want, we'll fight you to the death! Whoever runs is no real man!”

“Who will ride forth for me and cut this scoundrel down?” Song Jiang demanded.

Hua Rong, lance raised, kicked his horse and cantered to the center of the clearing.

“Who will take this rogue for me?” Gao Lian called.

A captain named Xue Yuanhui, wielding a pair of sabres, galloped forward on a spirited mount. The two men battled several rounds. Hua Rong turned his Steed and rode towards his original position. Brandishing his sabres, Xue raced in pursuit. Hua Rong slowed his horse slightly, fitted an arrow to his bow, twisted around suddenly in his saddle, and let fly. Xue tumbled head first to the ground. Both sides roared.

Angrily, Gao Lian clanged his sword three times on the animal-embossed bronze shield hanging from the pommel of his saddle. A yellow dust storm rose from the midst of the Miracle soldiers, dimming the sun and darkening the earth and sky. The men yelled, as from the yellow cloud there emerged savage beasts and weird serpents. Song Jiang's forces began retreating in alarm.

But then Gongsun pulled out an ancient sword with a pine tree pattern. He pointed it at the enemy, muttered an incantation, and shouted: “Speed!”

A golden ray shot into the yellow cloud and zapped every serpent and beast. As they fell they were seen to be only white paper cutouts, and the haze of yellow dust disintegrated.

Song Jiang pointed with his whip. All three contingents charged, mowing down men and horses of the foe. Their drums and banners were scattered in disarray. Gao Lian fled to the city with his Miracle soldiers. Song Jiang's forces chased them to the foot of the walls. But the drawbridge was hurriedly raised and the gates slammed shut. Logs and ballista stones rained down on the attackers.

At Song Jiang's command, gongs were beaten as a signal for his forces to make camp and be counted. They had won a stunning victory. Song Jiang

summoned Gongsun to his tent and thanked him for his marvellous Taoist sorcery. Then he rewarded the army's three contingents. The next day they divided and assaulted the city vigorously from all sides. To Song Jiang and Wu Yong, Gongsun said: “Although we destroyed more than half the enemy effectives last night, the three hundred Miracle soldiers got safely into the city. We must pound them hard, for tonight that villain is sure to raid our camp. We'll pull out in the dark of night, first erecting false palisades, and lie in ambush all around. Tell our men when they hear the sound of thunder and see flames rising in the camp to rush in and attack.”

Orders were so given. Early in the afternoon they withdrew from the city and returned to camp, where they drank and loudly made merry. When darkness fell, all quietly slipped away and took up ambush positions on the camp's perimeter.

Song Jiang, Wu Yong, Gongsun, Hua Rong, Qin Ming, Lu Fang and Guo Sheng waited on a rise. Sure enough, in the middle of the night Gao Lian mustered his three hundred Miracle soldiers. Each man carried on his back an iron gourd containing sulphur, nitrate, and other gunpowder material. Each held a hooked blade and an iron whisk, and bore in his mouth a reed whistle. Around the second watch the city gate was opened, and the drawbridge lowered, and they marched forth with Gao Lian at their head and followed by thirty cavalry.

As they neared the brigands' camp Gao Lian performed a secret spell. A black mist erupted heavenward. A wild wind howled, driving before it sand and stones, ripping up earth and soil. With their fire-making equipment, the three hundred Miracle soldiers ignited the contents of their gourds, and blew together on their whistles. In the inky darkness, the flames illuminated their bodies as they surged into the camp, brandishing sabres and axes.

On the bluff, Gongsun grasped his sword and murmured an incantation. A thunderbolt burst in the empty camp, setting it ablaze. The frightened Miracle soldiers tried to run, but they were engulfed by flames, which reddened earth and sky. There was nowhere they could flee.

The fighters lying in ambush now closed in on the palisades. They could see very clearly from the outer darkness. Not one of the three hundred

Miracle soldiers was allowed to escape. All were slaughtered, to the last man.

Gao Lian hastened towards the city with his thirty remaining cavalry. A pursuing battle steed was rapidly closing the gap between them. Its rider was Panther Head Lin Chong. He had almost caught up when Gao Lian yelled for the drawbridge to be lowered, and clattered into the city with eight or nine of his escort. Lin Chong captured the rest.

Once inside, Gao Lian ordered the citizens to man the ramparts. Song Jiang and Lin Chong had annihilated virtually his entire army as well as all his Miracle soldiers.

The next day, Song Jiang's forces again surrounded the city. “Who'd have thought he'd foil the magic I studied for years,” Gao Lian said to himself. “What can I do?” He would have to dispatch men to neighboring prefectures to plead for aid.

Hastily, he penned notes to Dongchang and Kouzhou. “They're not far,” he thought, “and the prefects in both received their appointments through my cousin. I'll request them to send reinforcements immediately.” He dispatched two senior staff officers with the missives, letting them out through the west gates. They travelled west along the road at top speed.

The brigand leaders wanted to pursue them, but Wu Yong said: “Let them go. We'll use their own plan against them.”

“What do you mean?” Song Jiang queried.

“They're very weak in the city in both officers and men, and they're begging for aid. We can have two of our columns pretend to be reinforcements and stage a mock battle with us on the road. Gao Lian will surely open the gates and come out to help them. That will be our chance to take the city. Meanwhile, we'll lure Gao Lian off onto a small path, and there we'll capture him.”

Very pleased, Song Jiang directed Dai Zong to return to Mount Liangshan and fetch two columns of men and horses and have them approach the city

separately.

Every night Gao Lian burned huge fires in the center of the city as a beacon and watched eagerly from the ramparts for his reinforcements. After several days, defenders on the walls observed a turmoil among Song Jiang's troops, though they didn't seem to be attacking. When this was reported to Gao Lian he quickly donned his armor and mounted the ramparts. He saw two columns of men and horses, their dust obscuring the sun, their shouts shaking the heavens, advancing rapidly. The brigand forces surrounding the city scattered at their approach.

Convinced that rescuers had arrived, Gao Lian mustered his forces. He opened the gates, and all charged out, dividing to join the fray.

When Gao Lian reached Song Jiang's position he saw the brigand leader, together with Hua Rong and Qin Ming galloping off along a path. Gao Lian and his men chased after them hotly. Suddenly, he heard cannon fire on the other side of the hill, and he grew suspicious. He and his unit turned around and started back. Gongs crashed on both sides of the path, and down the right slope came Lu Fang, and down the left slope came Guo Sheng, each leading five hundred men.

Gao Lian fled hurriedly, most of his escort already wiped out. When he got to the outskirts of the city he saw the banners of the men of Liangshan flying from its walls. No reinforcements were visible anywhere. Gao Lian ran with his broken remnants towards the mountains.

Before they had gone ten *li,* a body of men and horses surged out from around a bend, headed by Sun Li, and blocked their road. “I've been waiting for you,” Sun shouted. “Dismount and be bound!”

Gao Lian turned to go back. But from behind another unit appeared, with Zhu Tong in the lead. Both sides began closing in. With all roads cut, Gao Lian could only abandon his horse and scramble into the mountains on foot. His soldiers ran with him.

Frantically, Gao Lian mumbled an incantation and shouted: “Rise!” On a black cloud he floated as high as the hilltops. Then Gongsun rounded the

slope and saw this. From his horse, he gazed towards the sky and uttered a few phrases. “Speed!” he cried, pointing his sword upwards.

Gao Lian plummeted to earth from his cloud. Lei Heng sped forward from the side. With one sweep of his halberd, he cut him in two.

Lei Heng carried Gao Lian's head as all went down the mountain. A messenger was dispatched to report the news to Song Jiang swiftly. Song Jiang pulled back his outlying troops and entered Gaotang. He ordered that the citizenry were not to be harmed, and had proclamations posted assuring them that their lives and property were safe.

Next, he went to release Lord Chai from prison. The warden, jailors and guards had all left. Only the prisoners themselves, about fifty in number, remained. Their fetters were removed.

But Lord Chai was not among them. Song Jiang was worried and puzzled. In one of the buildings he found the family of Chai Jin's uncle, in another the family of Chai Jin himself. They had been arrested in Cangzhou and imprisoned here together. Because of the continuous fighting, they had not been questioned.

Only Lord Chai could not be found. Wu Yong directed that the jailors and guards be summoned. One of them said: “I am Lin Ren, the warden of this prison. Prefect Gao Lian instructed me to keep Lord Chai in a separate cell and make sure he didn't escape. 'If luck goes against us,' Gao Lian said, 'finish him off.' Three days ago he ordered me to take Lord Chai out and kill him. I could see that he was a good man. I didn't have the heart. So I stalled. 'He's very ill,' I said. 'He's eight tenths gone already. There's no need to do anything.' But then they really put the pressure on me, so I said: 'Chai Jin's dead.' The prefect was busy fighting every day, and he had no time. But I was afraid he'd send people to check up. If they found Chai Jin, I'd be in for it. So yesterday I took him to a dry well in the rear courtyard, removed his fetters, and pushed him in to hide there. I don't know whether he's alive or dead.”

Song Jiang hastily had Lin Ren lead him to the well. He peered down into its black maw, unable to fathom its depth. He called, but no one answered.

A rope was lowered. It extended about ninety feet before touching bottom.

“He doesn't seem to be there,” said Song Jiang, and tears rolled from his eyes.

“Don't upset yourself, Commander-in-Chief,” urged Wu Yong. “We won't know until we send someone down to see.”

Before the words were out of his mouth, Li Kui the Black Whirlwind pressed forward and shouted: “Let me go.”

“Good,” said Song Jiang. “You're the one who put him in his predicament. It's only right that you should repay.”

Li Kui laughed. “I'm not afraid to go down. Just don't cut the rope.”

“Don't be funny,” said Wu Yong.

A long rope was tied to a large basket, a frame placed over the well mouth, and the rope slung over the frame. Li Kui stripped to the buff, grasped his battle axes, and sat in the basket, which was lowered into the well. Two copper bells were affixed to the upper portion of the rope. * Gradually, the basket reached bottom. Li Kui crawled out and felt around. He touched a heap of bones.

“Father and mother,” he cried. “What friggin thing is this?”

He continued groping. The well bottom was damp. There wasn't a dry place to set foot. Li Kui put his axes in the basket and felt around with both hands. The area was quite wide. Finally he touched a man, crouched in a puddle.

“Lord Chai,” he exclaimed.

But the man didn't move. Li Kui put a hand in front of the man's face. Only faint breath was coming from his mouth.

“Thank Heaven and Earth,” Li Kui said. “He can still be saved!”

He climbed into the basket and shook the bells. The others hauled him up. He emerged alone and told what he had found.

“Go down again and put Lord Chai in the basket,” directed Song Jiang. “After we've got him out, we'll send the basket down for you.”

“I had two tricks played on me at Jizhou, brother. I don't want this to be a third.”

Song Jiang laughed. “Would I fool you? Go down, quickly.”

Once more Li Kui got into the basket and descended into the well. On reaching bottom, he crawled out, carried Lord Chai over, put him in the basket, and rang the bells. Those above began pulling immediately. When the basket reached the top, everyone was delighted to see Lord Chai.

Song Jiang examined him. He had a gash on his forehead, the flesh on both legs had been beaten to a pulp, and his eyes were half open and half closed. He was a sorry sight. A doctor was called to treat him.

Li Kui was bellowing at the bottom of the well. Song Jiang ordered that basket be lowered and that he be pulled up. Li Kui was very angry when he reached the surface.

“You're no good, any of you,” he raged. “Why didn't you send the basket down for me?”

“We were so worried about Lord Chai, we forgot,” Song Jiang explained. “Please forgive us.”

He ordered a cart for Chai Jin to lie on, and more than twenty others for the lord's family and that of his uncle, together with their valuables. He instructed Li Kui and Lei Heng to escort them to the Liangshan stronghold. He also directed that Gao Lian's entire household of thirty or forty, good and bad alike, be executed in the marketplace. The warden Lin Ren was rewarded. As much as possible of the riches in the prefecture's treasury and the grain in its granary, as well as Gao Lian's private property, were packed and carried off to the mountain fortress.

The brigand officers, high and low, left Gaotang and returned to Liangshan Marsh, troubling none of the prefectures and counties they passed through on the way. After several days, they reached the stronghold. In spite of his illness, Chai Jin got up and thanked Chao Gai, Song Jiang and the other leaders. Chao Gai ordered that a house be built near Song Jiang's residence on the summit for Lord Chai and his family.

All of the leaders were very pleased, for they had acquired two more commanders—Chai Jin and Tang Long. They banqueted in celebration. Of that we'll say no more.

By then Dongchang and Kouzhou had heard that Gao Lian, prefect of Gaotang had been killed and that the city had fallen. They immediately dispatched written reports to the emperor. Officials who had escaped from Gaotang also brought news of this to the capital. Marshal Gao Qiu thus learned that his cousin had been slain.

At the fifth watch the next day he went to the imperial ante-hall and waited for the morning bell. Hundreds of officials in ceremonial robes thronged the inner hall, waiting to attend the audience. At the third section of the fifth watch, the emperor entered the imperial chamber. Three times the ceremonial staff tapped, and civil and military officials formed in separate ranks as the emperor seated himself on the throne.

“Let those with business present their petitions,” intoned the chief of ceremonies.

Marshal Gao stepped forward and spoke: “Of late Chao Gai and Song Jiang, leaders of the bandits in Liangshan Marsh in Jizhou Prefecture, have committed a series of terrible crimes, plundering cities and robbing government granaries. In savage hordes they slaughtered government troops in Jizhou and ran riot in Jiangzhou and Wuweijun. Most recently, they wiped out the entire city of Gaotang and walked off with everything in the granary and treasury. They are like a canker in our vitals. If we don't quell them quickly they will grow so strong that we shall be unable to control them. I beseech Your Majesty to act.”

The emperor was shocked. He ordered Gao to assemble an army, arrest the culprits, thoroughly purge the Marsh, and kill all such persons.

“We don't need a large army to deal with those petty outlaws. If Your Majesty will grant me a certain man, he will take care of them,” said Gao.

“If you consider him so useful, he must be good. Have him go at once. Let us hear news of victory soon and we shall raise him in rank and reward him well. He will be given a high and important post.”

“He is the direct descendant of Huyan Zan, the general from Hedong who won fame at the start of the dynasty. His name is Huyan Zhuo. He wields two steel rods and is a man of peerless courage. At present he is garrison commander of Runing Shire, and has under him many crack soldiers and brave officers. With the services of this man we can restore order to Liangshan Marsh. If given good officers and skilled troops and placed at their head, he will swiftly clean out the lair and return victorious.”

The emperor directed the Council of Military Affairs to send an emissary to Runing immediately to fetch Huyan Zhuo. When the imperial court was concluded, Gao personally selected an official from the Council to serve as the emissary. He was sent forth that same day, and a time limit set for his return.

Huyan was conducting business in his military headquarters in Runing when an officer at the city gate entered and announced: “An emissary has come with an imperial edict ordering you, General, to the capital for a special mission.”

With several prefectural officials Huyan went to the gate and conducted the emissary to military headquarters. Huyan read the edict and had a feast laid for the emissary. Then he donned his helmet and armor, saddled his horse and gathered his weapons, and left Runing with an escort of thirty or forty. They travelled through the night and soon reached the capital after an uneventful journey. Huyan Zhuo dismounted before the Chancellery of Imperial Defense and went in to see Marshal Gao.

Gao Qiu was holding court. The gate-keeper announced: “Huyan Zhuo, summoned from Runing, is at the gate.” Very pleased, Gao directed that he be brought in. After asking Huyan solicitously about himself, Gao rewarded him.

Early the next day, Gao presented Huyan to their sovereign. The emperor could see that he was no ordinary man, and the imperial countenance smiled. He presented Huyan with a fine horse known as the Ebony Steed Which Treads in Snow. Pitch black in color except for snowy white hoofs, it could cover a thousand *li* in a single day. This beast was given to Huyan as his mount.

After thanking the emperor, Huyan Zhuo returned with Gao Qiu to the chancellery, where they discussed how to take Liangshan Marsh.

“I've spied out that place, Your Excellency,” said Huyan. “They've many officers and men, and they're well equipped with fine horses and weapons. An adversary not to be despised. But I have two men I can guarantee to lead my vanguard, while I follow with our main force. We definitely will win a great victory.”

Gao was delighted. “Who are these men?” he asked.

And because of the two Huyan guaranteed, the mountain citadel added fresh wings, and the fighters of Liangshan Marsh smashed the government hosts.

Truly, though their names were never inscribed in the Imperial Commendation Records, they were registered in the rolls of Fraternity Hall.

Who were the men Huyan proposed? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 55
Marshal Gao Raises a Three-Column Army
Huyan Zhuo Deploys an Armored Cavalry

“I have in mind a district garrison commander in Chenzhou, a man named Han Tao,” said Huyan. “Originally he's from the Eastern Capital. He's passed the Second Degree Military Examination and wields a datewood lance eighteen feet long. Everyone calls him the Ever-Victorious General. He can lead the vanguard. The other man I want is a district garrison commander in Yingzhou. His name is Peng Qi, and he also hails from the Eastern Capital. His family have been military people for generations. He uses a three-pointed two-edged lance. His skill with weapons is extraordinary, and he's known as the Eyes of Heaven General. This man can be second in command.”

Marshal Gao was very pleased. “With Han and Peng in the van, we need have no fears about those impudent bandits,” he exclaimed.

He wrote out two summonses and directed the Chancellery of Imperial Defense to dispatch messengers from the Council of Military Affairs with them immediately to Chenzhou and Yingzhou to fetch Han and Peng. In less than ten days the garrison commanders arrived in the capital. They went directly to the chancellery and presented themselves to Gao and Huyan.

The next day Gao and his entourage went to the training ground and watched imperial troops practicing and drilling. Then Gao returned to the Chancellery and conferred with the Council of Military Affairs on important matters of military strategy.

He asked Huyan and Han and Peng: “How many men have the three of you together?”

“About five thousand cavalry,” said Huyan. “Ten thousand, if you include the infantry.”

“Go back to your respective cities and pick three thousand of your best cavalry and five thousand foot soldiers. Assemble, set forth, and clean out Liangshan Marsh.”

“Our cavalry and infantry are crack troops,” said Huyan. “Both men and horses are in fine fettle. Your Excellency need have no worry about them.

But we're short of clothing and armor. We don't want to cause delay and inconvenience, but we must request more time to prepare."

"If that's the case, go to the capital armory and pick out as much as you need in the way of clothing, armor, helmets and weapons. I'll issue the order now. We want your forces well equipped so that they can cope with the enemy. The day you're ready to march I'll send officials to check you over."

Huyan took the order and went with some of his people to the armory. There he selected three thousand sets of steel armor, five thousand sets of horsehide armor, three thousand bronze and iron helmets, two thousand pikes, one thousand swords, countless bows and arrows, and over five hundred cannon, and loaded them all onto carts. The day the three men were leaving the capital Gao issued them three thousand battle chargers and all the grain their forces would require, and gave them personal gifts of gold and silver, silks and satins.

Huyan, Han Tao and Peng Qi submitted written guarantees of victory, and took their leave of Marshal Gao and officials from the Council of Military Affairs. '

They mounted their horses and rode back to Runing. The journey was uneventful. When they arrived, Huyan directed Han Tao and Peng Qi to return to their respective cities, raise their armies and bring them to Runing.

In less than half a month the three columns were complete. Huyan issued the equipment he had drawn from the imperial armory—clothing, armor, helmets, swords, pikes and saddles. He also had chainmail made, plus various other items of military ware, and distributed these as well among the three columns.

They were ready to go. Gao sent two officials from his chancellery to review them. The officials handsomely rewarded the three commanders, and Huyan marched forth with his three columns. Han Tao led the van, Huyan commanded the main force in the middle, Peng Qi and his men brought up the rear. The three columns of infantry and cavalry were a splendid sight as they hastened grimly towards Liangshan Marsh.

To the mountain stronghold came a far-posted scout with a report of the approaching troops. Chao Gai and Song Jiang, together with Military Advisor Wu Yong, magic expert Gongsun Sheng, and the various other chieftains had been feasting daily in celebration with Chai Jin. When they heard that Two Rods Huyan Zhuo of Runing was leading an army of infantry and cavalry to attack, they conferred on strategy.

“I've heard of him,” said Wu Yong. “He's a direct descendant of Huyan Zan, the general from Hedong who helped establish the dynasty. His skill with weapons is superb. When he wields those two steel rods of his no one can come near him. We must use our most competent and courageous officers. To capture him we'll have to apply first force and second guile.”

Before the words were out of his mouth, Black Whirlwind Li Kui spoke up. “I'll nab the wretch for you!”

“You'd never do it,” said Song Jiang. “I have a plan of my own. We'll ask Qin Ming the Thunderbolt to fight the first bout, Panther Head Lin Chong the second, Hua Rong the third, Ten Feet of Steel the fourth, and Sickly General Sun Li the fifth. These bouts must come one right after the next, like the spokes of a spinning wheel. I myself will head ten brothers who will command our main divisions. On the left will be Zhu Tong, Lei Heng, Mu Hong, Huang Xin and Lu Fang. On the right will be Yang Xiong, Shi Xiu, Ou Peng, Ma Lin and Guo Sheng. Our water approaches will be defended by boats under the command of Li Jun, Zhang Heng, Zhang Shun and the three Ruan brothers. Li Kui and Yang Lin will lead two columns of infantry and lie in ambush as reinforcements.”

Shortly thereafter, Qin Ming went down the mountain with a unit of men and horses. They set up a battle position on a broad plain.

Although it was already winter, the weather was pleasantly warm. The next day, they saw in the distance the approaching government troops. The van, led by Ever-Victorious General Han Tao, made camp and built surrounding palisades. There was no fighting that night.

The two armies faced each other at dawn the following day. Horns blared, and the thunder of drums shook the heavens. On Song Jiang's side Qin

Ming the Thunderbolt rode forth from the arch of pennants, his wolf-toothed mace athwart his mount. On the opposite side at the arch of pennants appeared Han Tao, leader of the van. Holding his lance crosswise, he gave his horse rein and shouted at his foe.

“We heavenly hosts have arrived! But instead of surrendering, you dare to resist! You're asking to die! I'll fill in your Marsh and pulverise your Mount Liangshan! I'll capture you rebellious bandits, take you to the capital, and have you smashed to bits!”

Qin Ming was a hot tempered man. Without a word, he clapped his steed, and rode straight at Han Tao, flourishing his mace. Han Tao kicked up his horse, levelled his lance, and galloped to meet him. They fought over twenty rounds, and Han Tao began to weaken. He turned to go. From behind him came Huyan Zhuo, commander of the main contingent. He saw that Han Tao was being bested, and he charged forth on the snowy-hoofed black steed the emperor had given him, roaring and waving his steel rods.

Qin Ming recognized him, and prepared to do battle. But Lin Chong the Panther Head cantered up, calling: “Rest a while, commander. Let me go three hundred rounds with this fellow, then we'll see.”

Lin Chong levelled his serpent-decorated lance and charged Huyan. Qin Ming wheeled his mount to the left and rode out of sight behind a bend. The new adversaries were evenly matched. The lance and rods interwove in flowery patterns for more than fifty rounds, but neither man could vanquish the other.

Hua Rong appeared for the third bout. At the entrance to the field of combat he called: “Rest a while, General Lin Chong. Watch me capture the lout.”

Panther Head turned his horse and departed. Huyan had seen enough of his high-powered use of weapons. He let him go and returned to his own position, while Lin Chong disappeared around a bend with his men. Huyan was already among his rear column when Hua Rong emerged with lance at the level. Peng Qi the Eyes of Heaven General, astride a glossy brown piebald that could run a thousand *li* in a day, rode towards Hua Rong. Holding crosswise his three-pointed, two edged, four-holed, eight-ringed

weapon, Peng shouted: “Traitorous robber! You're devoid of all morality! Let's fight this one to a finish!”

Hua Rong was furious. Without a word, he clashed with Peng Qi.

More than twenty rounds they battled. Huyan could see that Peng was weakening. He gave his horse rein and engaged Hua Rong.

Before they had fought three rounds, the girl warrior Ten Feet of Steel rode out for the fourth round. “Rest a while, General Hua Rong,” she cried. “Watch me take this oaf!”

Hua Rong led his contingent off to the right and departed round a bend. Even before the battle between Peng Qi and Ten Feet of Steel approached a decisive stage, Sun Li the Sickly General, who would fight the fifth bout, had already arrived. He had reined his horse at the edge of the field of combat and was watching the two contestants.

They fought in a cloud of dust with murderous intensity, one with a long-handled sabre, the other with a pair of swords. For over twenty rounds they battled. Then the girl separated her blades and rode off. Peng Qi, eager for glory, gave chase. Ten Feet of Steel hung her swords on the pommel of her saddle. From inside her robe she pulled out a red lariat bearing twenty-four gold hooks. She let Peng Qi draw near, then suddenly twisted around and flung the rope. The noose landed squarely on him before he could ward it off, and he was dragged from his horse. Sun Li yelled a command, and his men rushed forward and grabbed the fallen rider.

Huyan, enraged, galloped to the rescue. Ten Feet of Steel clapped her steed and met him. The seething Huyan would have swallowed her down in one gulp, if he could. They battled more than ten rounds, Huyan increasingly frantic because he couldn't defeat the girl.

“What a spitfire,” he fretted. “After all this fighting, she's still so tough!”

Impatiently, he feinted and let her close in, then raised his steel rods and started to bring them down. The swords were still in their resting place when the rod in Huyan's right hand was only a hair away from the girl's

forehead. But Ten Feet of Steel was clear of eye and swift of hand. A sword sprang into her right fist, flew up and warded off the blow with a clang of metal and a shower of sparks.

The girl galloped back towards her own position. Huyan raced in pursuit. Sun Li promptly levelled his lance, intercepted Huyan and engaged him in fierce combat. Song Jiang moved up with his ten divisions and deployed them in battle formation. Ten Feet of Steel and her contingent, meanwhile, had ridden away down the slope.

Song Jiang was very pleased that Peng Qi the Eyes of Heaven General had been taken. He rode to the front to watch Sun Li and Huyan do battle. Sun Li sheathed his lance and went at Huyan with the steel rod ribbed like bamboo, which had been hanging from his wrist. Now, both were wielding rods of steel. Even their style of dress was similar. Sun Li wore a five cornered iron helmet bound in place by a red silk band around his forehead, a white-flowered black silk robe flecked with jade green, and darkly gleaming gold embossed armor. He rode a black stallion, and wielded a bamboo-shaped steel rod with dragon's eyes. Truly, a bolder picture than Yuchi Gong, that hero of old.

As to Huyan Zhuo, he wore a high pointed five-cornered helmet bound round the forehead by gold-flecked yellow silk, a black robe with sequins of seven stars, and darkly gleaming armor of over-lapping leaf. He rode the snowy-hoofed black stallion given him by the emperor, and wielded two octagonal steel rods polished bright as water. The one in his left hand weighed twelve catties, the one in his right thirteen. He indeed resembled his ancestor Huyan Zan.

Left and right over the field of combat they fought for more than thirty rounds, with neither man the victor.

When Han Tao saw Peng Qi captured, he quickly gathered the rear column and led them forward in a headlong rush. Song Jiang, afraid that they would break through, pointed his whip, and his ten commanders moved their divisions up to meet them, the last two spreading out in an enveloping pincers. Huyan hurriedly wheeled his columns around and each engaged their adversaries.

Why didn't the Liangshan warriors win total victory? Because of Huyan's “Armored Cavalry.” Both horses and men wore chainmail. The battle steeds were draped to their hoofs, the soldiers protected to the eyes. Although Song Jiang's animals were equipped with some cover, this consisted mainly of red-tasseled net masks, copper bells, and plumes. The arrows sped by his archers were easily deflected by the chainmail. And all three thousand of Huyan's cavalry were armed with bows. They spewed flights of arrows which discouraged the men of Liangshan from coming any closet.

Song Jiang hastily had the horns sound the call to withdraw. Huyan also pulled his forces back twenty *li,* where they made camp.

The Song Jiang army encamped west of the mountain and settled their horses. At Song Jiang's command, his swordsmen hustled Peng Qi forward. Shouting for them to fall back, Song Jiang rose and untied his captive's bonds, then escorted him into the headquarters tent. He seated Peng Qi as a guest and kowtowed. Peng Qi at once returned the courtesy.

“I am your prisoner. By rights I should be killed. Why are you treating me with such courtesy, General?”

“Most of us are hunted men who have taken temporary shelter in the Marsh. The imperial court has sent you, General, here to arrest us. The proper thing for me would be to submit and be bound. But I fear for my life. And so I've criminally clashed with you. I beg your forgiveness for my presumptuousness.”

“I have long known of your fraternal devotion and righteousness, of your aid to the endangered and your succor to the needy. But I never expected such chivalry! If you will spare my miserable life, I will serve you with every breath in my body!”

That day Song Jiang had the Eyes of Heaven General Peng Qi escorted to the mountain fortress to be introduced to Chao Gai and given refuge there. After rewarding his three armies, he conferred with his commanders on the military situation.

Meanwhile, Huyan Zhuo discussed with Han Tao how to vanquish Liangshan Marsh.

“Today, those louts moved forward in a quick covering action when they saw us coming at them,” said Han Tao. “Tomorrow, we ought to hit them with our entire cavalry. That way, a big victory will be guaranteed.”

“Exactly what I had in mind. I just wanted to make sure you agreed.”

Huyan then ordered that all three thousand of the cavalry be stretched out in a single line, divided into troops of thirty, and that all the horses in each troop be connected together by chains. On nearing the foe, the men were to use arrows at a distance and their lances when they got close, and drive relentlessly ahead. The three thousand armored cavalry would become one hundred platoons, each locked in solid formation. Five thousand infantry would follow as support.

“Don't challenge them in person, tomorrow,” Huyan admonished Han Tao. “You and I will stay behind with the reinforcements. When the fighting starts, we'll rush them from three sides.”

It was decided they would go into action the next day at dawn. The following day Song Jiang set five troops of cavalry to the fore, backed by the ten divisions, with two contingents to left and right lying in ambush.

Qin Ming rode forth and challenged Huyan. But the imperial troops only shouted, and no one appeared. The five Liangshan cavalry units spread out in a line. Qin Ming was in the center, Lin Chong and Ten Feet of Steel were on the left, Hua Rong and Sun Li were on the right. The ten divisions under Song Jiang stood to the rear, a dense mass of men and horses. About a thousand imperial foot soldiers were arrayed opposite. Although they beat their drums and yelled, not a single man rode out to joust Song Jiang grew suspicious. He quietly gave the order for his rear forces to withdraw, then rode up to Hua Rong's contingent to look. Suddenly, a volley of cannon fire erupted from the opposite side. The thousand imperial foot soldiers separated into two sections and platoons of linked cavalry poured through in an enveloping three-sided phalanx. Arrows winged from both flanks. The middle bristled with long lances.

Startled, Song Jiang ordered his archers to reply. But how could they withstand this assault? Every animal in the thirty-horse platoons galloped together, unable to hold back even if it wanted to. From all over the hills and plains the linked cavalry charged.

Song Jiang's forward five cavalry units were thrown into a panic. They couldn't stem the tide. The rear divisions, also unable to make a stand, broke and ran. Song Jiang raced away on his horse, guarded by his ten commanders.

A platoon of imperial linked cavalry closed in after them. Li Kui, Yang Lin and their men rose out of their ambush in the reeds and drove them off. Song Jiang fled to the water's edge. Li Jun, Zhang Heng, Zhang Shun and the three Ruan brothers were waiting with war boats. Song Jiang hurriedly boarded one of craft and ordered them to rescue the chieftains and get them into the boats, quickly.

A platoon of linked cavalry rode right up to the river and showered the craft with arrows, but shields blocked the arrows and no one was hurt.

The boats were rowed hastily to Duck's Bill Shore, where everyone disembarked. In the fort there a count was made. They had lost more than half their effectives. Fortunately all of the chieftains had been saved, although several of their mounts had been killed.

Shortly thereafter, Shi Yong, Shi Qian, Sun Xin and Mistress Gu arrived. “The imperial infantry swarmed all over us,” they reported. “They levelled our inns and houses. If our boats hadn't rescued us, we would have been captured.”

Song Jiang consoled them and took stock of his commanders. Six had arrow wounds—Lin Chong, Lei Heng, Li Kui, Shi Xiu, Sun Xin and Huang Xin. Innumerable lesser chieftains had also been struck by arrows or otherwise wounded.

When Chao Gai learned of this, he came down the mountain with Wu Yong and Gongsun Sheng. They found Song Jiang frowning and depressed.

“Don't fret, brother,” Wu Yong said soothingly. “Both victory and defeat are common fare for the soldier. Why worry? We'll work out a good plan to deal with that linked cavalry.”

Chao Gai ordered the naval forces to strengthen the shore stockades, repair the boats, and guard the beaches day and night. He urged Song Jiang to return to the mountain stronghold and rest. But Song insisted on remaining at the fort on Duck's Bill Shore. He agreed only that the wounded commanders should go up and recuperate.

Huyan Zhuo went back to camp after his tremendous victory and had the linked horses unchained. Warriors came forward, one by one, to claim their commendations. They had slain countless numbers of the foe. More than five hundred prisoners had been taken, and over three hundred battle chargers. Huyan sent a messenger to the capital to report the glad tidings, and he richly rewarded his three columns.

Marshal Gao was holding court in his chancellery when word came from the gatehouse: “Huyan Zhuo has won a victory in his campaign against Liangshan Marsh. A messenger has brought the news.”

The marshal was so delighted that he went to the imperial court early the next morning and, without waiting his turn, relayed the information. Extremely pleased, the emperor presented him with ten bottles of vintage wine bearing the imperial yellow seal, and a fine brocaded robe. He directed that an official deliver one hundred thousand strings of cash to Huyan's army. Bearing the imperial order, Gao returned to his chancellery and dispatched an official with the money.

On learning that an imperial emissary was coming, Huyan and Han Tao went twenty *li* to meet him. They brought him to the camp, accepted the emperor's reward with thanks, and served wine and entertained the emissary. He suggested that the rewards be distributed among the troops at once. He said he would wait until they had captured the brigand leaders, and then he would take them, in addition to the five hundred prisoners already rounded up, to the capital, where they would be paraded through the streets and punished.

“I don't see Peng Qi around,” the emissary noted.

“In his eagerness to take Song Jiang, he plunged deep into enemy terrain and was captured,” Huyan explained. “Those villains won't dare attack again, but we're going after them. We must eradicate their mountain fortress, sweep clean the marsh, capture the brigands and destroy their lair. Unfortunately, they're surrounded by water, and there are no roads leading in. We can see their forts in the distance, but the only way we can hit them is with long-range cannon. I have heard that in the Eastern Capital there's a cannon expert named Ling Zhen. He's known as Heaven-Shaking Thunder. He makes pieces with a range of fourteen to fifteen *li.* When his stone cannon balls land, the earth and sky quake, mountains tumble and cliffs split asunder. If we can get him, we'll smash the bandits' lair. Ling Zhen is also very skilled with weapons. His archery and horsemanship are splendid. I wish you'd go back to the capital and speak to the Marshal about this. Ask him to rush Ling Zhen out here, and we'll take the brigands' stronghold.”

The emissary agreed, and set out the next day. Nothing happened on the road. On reaching the capital he went to see Gao and told him that Huyan requested cannoneer Ling Zhen so that he could perform a great deed. Gao issued a summons for Ling Zhen, who was assistant custodian of the imperial armory. Ling's ancestral home was in Yanling. In the Song Dynasty, he was the best cannoneer in the country, which was why he was known as Heaven-Shaking Thunder. Moreover, he was an excellent fighter with all kinds of weapons.

Ling Zhen reported to Marshal Gao, who commissioned him a commander of the army in the field and instructed him to ready his horse and arms and depart. Ling gathered the powder and explosives he needed, plus various types of cannon, stone balls and mountings, and loaded them on carts. Taking his armor, helmet, sabre and luggage, he left the Eastern Capital with thirty or forty soldiers and headed for Liangshan Marsh.

When he reached the camp he called first on Huyan, the commanding general, then on the leader of the van Han Tao. He inquired about the roads and paths distant and near the brigands' shore fort and the state of the cliffs guarding their mountain stronghold. Ling Zhen prepared three types of cannon—Fireball, Golden Wheel, and Mother and Sons. He had his soldiers

assemble the mountings, brought his guns to the river bank, and primed them for action.

Song Jiang, in the Duck's Bill Shore fort, conferred with Wu Yong on how to achieve a break-through on the battlefield. But they could not think of anything.

A spy entered and reported: “The Eastern Capital has sent a cannoneer, Ling Zhen, Heaven-Shaking Thunder. He's set up guns near the river and he's getting ready to bombard our forts.”

“It doesn't matter,” said Wu Yong. “Our mountain stronghold is surrounded by a marsh which is full of creeks and ponds. It's a long way from the river. Even if he has guns that can reach the sky, he'll never hit it. We'll just abandon this fort on Duck's Bill Shore and let him shoot. Then we'll talk some more.”

Song Jiang left the fort and returned to the mountain stronghold. Chao Gai and Gongsun Sheng escorted him to Fraternity Hall.

“How are we going to crack the enemy?” they asked.

Almost before the words were out of their mouths, they heard the boom of artillery at the foot of the mountain. Three cannon balls were fired. Two landed in the river. A third scored a direct hit on the Duck's Bill Shore fort.

Song Jiang watched glumly. The other leaders blanched.

“If Ling Zhen could be inveigled to the river we could nab him,” said Wu Yong. “Then we could discuss what to do about the enemy.”

“We'll send Li Jun, Zhang Heng, Zhang Shun and the three Ruan brothers in charge of six boats. Zhu Tong and Lei Heng will be on the opposite shore,” said Chao Gai. And he told what each would do.

The six naval leaders received their orders and divided into two units. Li Jun and Zhang Heng took forty or fifty good swimmers in two fast craft and slipped across through the reeds. Backing them were Zhang Shun and the

three Ruan brothers with another forty or so men in a fleet of small boats. On reaching the shore, Li Jun and Zhang Heng and their men, shouting and yelling, charged up to the cannon mountings and knocked them over.

Soldiers hurriedly reported this to Ling Zhen, who at once took two Fireball cannon and his lance, mounted his horse, and hastened to the scene with a thousand soldiers. Only then did Li Jun and Zhang Heng and their men leave. Ling Zhen chased them as far as the reedy shore, where a line of forty small craft, manned by a hundred or more sailors, were moored.

Li and Zhang went aboard, but didn't cast off. When Ling Zhen and his force came in sight, everyone on the boats shouted and jumped into the water.

Ling Zhen's men seized the boats. Zhu Tong and Lei Heng, on the opposite shore, began yelling and pounding drums. Ling Zhen ordered his soldiers to board the craft and go across and get them.

When the boats reached the middle of the river, Zhu Tong and Lei Heng struck a gong loudly. Forty or fifty swimmers rose from beneath the waves and pulled the plugs from sterns. Water flooded the craft. Strong hands capsized many of the boats, dumping the soldiers into the river.

Ling Zhen made haste to go back, but his craft's rudder had already been removed under water. Two of the chieftains clambered aboard. With one quick rock, they turned it bottom up. Ling Zhen landed in the water. He was grabbed by Ruan the Second from below and dragged ashore. There, other chieftains who were waiting had him bound and; taken up the mountain.

Over two hundred soldiers were captured. More than half of the remainder had been drowned. The few who escaped with their lives reported to Huyan Zhuo. He hastily mustered his forces and galloped to the rescue. But the boats had already crossed to Duck's Bill Shore. It was too far for arrows. Besides, the raiders were gone.

All Huyan's fuming was to no avail. He could only return to his camp, seething with rage.

When word reached the stronghold that Heaven-Shaking Thunder Ling Zhen had been captured, Song Jiang and all the leaders went down to the second gate to meet him. Song Jiang personally untied his bonds.

“I told you to invite the commander courteously to call at our fortress,” he said to his men reprovingly. “How could you behave so rudely?”

Ling Zhen kowtowed and thanked the leaders for not killing him. Song Jiang poured him a libation cup. Then, he took Ling Zhen by the hand and led him up to the fortress. Ling Zhen saw that Peng Qi had been made one of the chieftains. The cannoneer sealed his lips and said not a word. Peng Qi offered him some advice.

“Leaders Chao Gai and Song Jiang act righteously for Heaven, receiving bold fellows from all over. They are waiting only for an amnesty and acceptance into the emperor's forces so that they may serve the country. Since you and I are here, we should take their orders.”

Song Jiang added a few courteous apologetic phrases.

“I can remain easily enough,” said Ling Zhen. “My only concern is that my wife and mother are still in the Eastern Capital. When it's known about me, they're sure to be put to death. What can I do?”

“Rest easy in your mind,” said Song Jiang. “In a few days we'll bring them here.”

Ling Zhen thanked him. “You are too considerate. When I die I'll be able to close my eyes.”

“Let a feast be laid in celebration,” Chao Gai directed.

The next day there was a meeting of the leaders in Fraternity Hall. As they drank Song Jiang discussed with them the problem of the linked cavalry. No one could think of how to cope with it. Finally, Gold-Coin Spotted Leopard Tang Long rose to his feet.

“Though I have no talent, I'd like to suggest a plan,” he said. “But we need a certain weapon and a cousin of mine.”

“What kind of weapon, and who is this cousin?” asked Wu Yong.

Calmly, Tang Long clasped his hands together, stepped forward and replied.

And truly, from the capital of jade and gold, a man fabulous as a unicorn and bold as a lion was lured to captivity.

What was the weapon, who was the man? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 56
Wu Yong Sends Shi Qian to Steal Armor
Tang Long Lures Xu Ning up the Mountain

“My ancestors have always been armorers,” Tang Long said to the chieftains. “Because of this skill my father was raised by Border Area Governor Old General Zhong to be head of the Yanan garrison. The linked cavalry method won victories for the previous emperor. The only way you can beat it is with barbed lances. I have a drawing of such a lance, passed down to me by my family, which can serve as a likeness. I can make one for you, but I don't know how to use it. Only my cousin, an arms instructor, knows. The art has been handed down from generation to generation. They never teach it to any outsider. My cousin can ply the lance ahorse or on foot. When he goes into action, he's like nothing human.”

“You don't mean Xu Ning, Arms Instructor of the Metal Lancers?” Lin Chong interrupted.

“The very man.”

“I'd forgotten until you mentioned him. His skill with metal and barbed lances is indeed unique. We met many times when I was in the capital and tested our military arts against one another. We developed a deep mutual respect and affection. But how can you get him to come up here?”

“Xu Ning has a matchless ancestral treasure. It protects his family from evil spirits. I often saw it when I went with my father to visit Xu Ning's mother in the Eastern Capital. It's a suit of goose-feather armor hooped in metal. Known as 'lion's fur', it's light and snug-fitting, and no blade or arrow can pierce it. Many high officials have begged to see it, but Xu Ning always refuses. He cherishes it like his life. He keeps it in a leather box which he hangs on the central beam of his bedroom. If we can get hold of that armor, he'll have to come whether he wants to or not.”

“No problem at all,” said Wu Yong. “We'll ask our talented brother Shi Qian, Flea on a Drum, to attend to it.”

“If it's there, I'll get it, by hook or crook,” Shi Qian avowed.

“Do that, and I guarantee to bring Xu Ning up the mountain,” said Tang Long.

“How?” Song Jiang demanded.

Tang Long leaned close and whispered in his ear. Song Jiang laughed.

“Very shrewd.”

“You'll need three men to go with you to the Eastern Capital,” Wu Yong said. “One to buy the gunpowder and other ingredients for the cannons, and two to fetch Commander Ling Zhen's family.”

Peng Qi rose and said: “If someone could go to Yingzhou and fetch my family as well, I would consider it a blessing.”

“Have no fears, Commander,” said Song Jiang. “Write notes, both of you, please. I'll have people see to it.” And he directed: “Yang Lin, take some money and the letter, and go with men to Yingzhou and bring Commander Peng Qi's family. Xue Yong go to the Eastern Capital in the guise of a medicine pedlar who gives exhibitions of weapons skill and fetch the family of Commander Ling Zhen. Li Yun dress as a merchant and buy the gunpowder and other ingredients. Yue Ho and Tang Long accompany Xue Yong.”

After Shi Qian went off down the mountain, Song Jiang had Tang Long make a sample barbed lance, under the supervision of Lei Heng who came from a family of blacksmiths. Once this was done, he directed the stronghold's armorers, with Lei Heng in charge, to copy the model in large numbers. Of this we'll say no more.

A send-off feast was laid for Yang Lin, Xue Yong, Li Yun, Yue Ho and Tang Long, and they went down the mountain. The next day Dai Zong also departed to inquire carefully into the situation. It would be hard to tell all the details in a few words.

Shi Qian concealed on his person certain tools and implements as he left Liangshan Marsh. He followed a winding road until he reached the capital. He spent the night at an inn and the next day quietly entered the city. He inquired where he might find Arms Instructor Xu Ning.

“Go through the gate of the battalion compound,” a man instructed, pointing. “He lives in the fifth house. It has a black gate in the corner of the wall.”

Flea on a Drum entered the compound and looked first at Xu Ning's front gate, then walked around and examined the rear. The house and courtyard were enclosed in a high wall, but he could see a cute two-storey building, and beside it a tall decorated pole. He studied the layout a while, then called at the house of a neighbor.

“Do you know whether Arms Instructor Xu is at home?”

“He doesn't get back till evening. He leaves again at the fifth watch for guard duty in the palace.”

Shi Qian thanked the man politely and returned to the inn. He got his tools and hid them on his person.

“I'm going out and probably won't be back tonight,” he said to the attendant. “Look after the things in my room.”

“No need to worry. This is the imperial city. We don't have any thieves around here,” the attendant replied.

Shi Qian went into the city, had some dinner, then quietly approached the home of Xu Ning in the compound of the Metal Lancers Battalion. He looked around but couldn't find any suitable place to hide. Night was falling, and he took up a position inside the compound gateway. Soon it was dark. There was no moon in the winter sky.

He noted a big poplar behind an Earth God Temple. He shinnied up, sat astride a limb, and watched silently. Xu Ning returned and went into his house. Two people with lanterns closed and locked the compound gate, then

went back to their homes. In a drum tower the beat of the first watch sounded. Through the chill overcast the stars appeared lustreless. Dew turned to frost. All was still.

Shi Qian slid down from his tree, stole to Xu Ning's rear gate, and effortlessly scaled the courtyard wall. He crossed a small garden to the kitchen and peered in. Two serving girls were still cleaning up in the light of a lamp. Up the decorative pole he went, and over to the upcurved eave of a corner of the roof. Lying in this concealment, he looked into the window of the upper storey. Xu Ning and his wife were seated beside a stove. The woman held a child of six or seven in her arms.

It was their bedroom. Sure enough, there was a big leather box tied to the beam. Near the door hung a bow and arrows and a dagger. On a clothes rack were garments of various colors.

“Plum Fragrance,” Xu Ning called, “fold these clothes for me.”

One of the serving girls came up the stairs. On a long sideboard table she folded a purple embroidered robe, an official tunic with a green lining trimmed at the bottom by multi-hued embroidered flounces, a colored silk neckerchief, a red and green belt sash, and several handkerchiefs. These, plus a yellow kerchief packet containing a golden sash decorated with a lichee design and from which two otter tails dangled, were all wrapped in a cloth and placed to warm on a fender above the stove. Shi Qian's eyes didn't miss a thing.

Some time after the second watch Xu Ning went to bed.

“Are you on duty tomorrow?” the wife asked.

“The emperor is going to the Auspicious Dragon Hall. I must get up early and go at the fifth watch to attend him.”

The wife said to Plum Fragrance: “Your master is on guard duty tomorrow at the fifth watch. You girls get up at the fourth, heat water and prepare something to eat.”

“Obviously, that leather box on the beam has the armor in it,” thought Shi Qian. “It would be best if I could take it during the night. But I must do it without alarming them, or tomorrow I'll never get out of the city, and that would ruin our whole operation. I'll wait till the fifth watch. There'll be time enough.”

When both husband and wife were in bed, the two serving girls lay down on pallets outside the bedroom door. A night lamp had been lit upon the table. Soon the four were asleep. The girls had worked hard all day, and were exhausted. They snored lustily.

Flea on a Drum crept over, produced a long hollow reed, poked it through a hole in the window, and puffed. The lamp went out.

Around the fourth watch Xu Ning rose and called to the girls to fetch hot water. Awakening, they noticed that the lamp was extinguished.

“Aiya!” they exclaimed. “You've got no light.”

“Go to the back and get another one. What are you waiting for?”

Plum Fragrance and the other girl opened the door at the head of the stairs and went down. As soon as he heard the stairs creak, Flea on a Drum slid down the pole and hid in the darkness beside the rear door. The girls opened this, came out and went to open the gate in the courtyard wall. Shi Qian darted into the kitchen and hid under the table. Plum Fragrance returned with a lighted lamp, closed the door and started the stove. The other girl went upstairs with a burning charcoal brazier. Before long, the water was boiling, and Plum Fragrance took that up, too.

Xu Ning washed, rinsed his mouth, and called for some heated wine. The girls laid out meat and buns. When Xu Ning finished, he instructed them to feed his orderly who was waiting outside. Shi Qian heard him descend the stairs and tell his orderly to eat. Then Xu Ning shouldered his pack, took his metal lance and came out. The girls lit a lantern and saw him to the gate.

Flea on a Drum emerged from beneath the table, mounted the stairs, climbed the lattice wall to the beam and crouched upon it. After closing the

house door, the girls blew out the lantern, came up the stairs, undressed, and threw themselves down on their pallets.

When he was sure they were asleep, Shi Qian on the beam extended his long reed and again puffed out the lamp. Softly, he untied the leather box. He was about to come down when the wife, hearing a noise, awakened.

“What's that sound up on the beam?” she called to Plum Fragrance.

Shi Qian promptly squeaked like a rat.

“Can't you hear, mistress?” said the girl. “Those are rats, fighting.”

Shi Qian emitted a series of squeaks like a whole battle, slipped down, stealthily opened the door at the head of the stairs, agilely swung the box to his back, went down the stairs, opened the house door, and stepped out. The various guards were departing, and the battalion compound gate was open, it having been unlocked at the fourth watch. He mingled with the crowd and left swiftly, not stopping until he reached his inn outside the city.

It was still not yet light. He knocked on the door and went to his room to get his luggage. He tied this and the box to a carrying pole, paid his bill, left the inn and headed east. Only after covering more than forty *li* did he stop at an eating house and make himself some food.

Suddenly a man came in. Shi Qian looked up. It was none other than Dai Zong the Marvellous Traveller. Dai observed that Shi Qian had got what he had gone for. The two conversed in low tones.

“I'll take the armor to our mountain fortress,” Dai Zong said. “You follow slowly with Tang Long.”

Shi Qian opened the leather box, took out the metal-bound goose feather armor and wrapped it in a bundle, which Dai Zong tied to his body. The Marvellous Traveller left the inn, performed his magic rites, and sped off to Liangshan Marsh.

Shi Qian tied the empty leather box openly to one end of his carrying pole. He finished eating, paid the bill, shouldered the pole, and set out. When he had gone about twenty *li,* he met Tang Long. They went into a tavern to confer.

“I want you to follow me along this road,” Tang Long said. “Whenever you see a tavern, eating house or inn with a white chalk circle on the door you can go in and buy meat and wine. At those inns you can rest. Put the leather box where everyone can see it. Wait for me one stage from here.”

Tang Long slowly drank his wine, then proceeded to the Eastern Capital.

In Xu Ning's house, the two serving girls rose at daybreak. They observed that not only was the door at the head of the stairs open, but the inner door and house door below as well. They made a hasty check. Nothing seemed to be missing. They went upstairs and reported to their mistress.

“We can't understand it. All the doors are open, but nothing is gone.”

“At the fifth watch, I heard a noise on the beam. You said it was rats, fighting. Better take a look and see whether that leather box is all right.”

The girls did so, and screamed. “It's disappeared!”

Hurriedly, the wife got out of bed. “Ask someone to go to the Auspicious Dragon Hall at once and notify the master. Tell him to come home as soon as possible.”

Plum Fragrance and her companion hastily sent three or four men, one after another, with the message, but all returned with the same reply: “The Metal Lancers have accompanied the emperor to the Inner Palace Gardens. The Gardens are surrounded by his personal guard. Nobody can get in. You'll just have to wait for Xu Ning to come home.”

The wife and girls were like ants on a hot griddle. But there was nothing they could do. They fluttered about anxiously, unable to eat or drink.

Only at dusk did Xu Ning remove his official robe. He gave it to his orderly. Carrying his metal lance, Xu slowly returned. At the gateway of the battalion compound, a neighbor spoke to him.

“Your house has been robbed! Your wife has been waiting for you all day!”

Startled, Xu Ning hurried home. The serving girls met him at the door.

“The thief must have slipped in when you left at the fifth watch,” they said. “All he took was that leather box on the beam.”

Cries of anguish burst through Xu Ning's lips from the depths of his vitals.

“Who knows when that thief crept into our room,” exclaimed his wife.

“Anything else wouldn't have mattered,” said Xu Ning. “But that goose feather armor has been a family heirloom for four generations! It's never been lost. Marshal Wang the dilettante offered me thirty thousand strings of cash, but I hadn't the heart to sell it. I thought I might need it in battle again. Because I was afraid that something might happen to it, I tied it on the beam. Many people asked to see it, but I said it was gone. If I raise a hue and cry about it, they'll surely laugh at me. Now it really is gone. What can I do?”

That night he couldn't sleep. “Who could have stolen it?” he wondered. “It must have been someone who knew I had the armor.”

His wife thought a while and said: “The thief must have already been in the house when the lamp went out. Someone who became enamored of it and tried to buy it from you probably sent a high-class housebreaker to steal it when you wouldn't sell. Get people to ask around quietly and find out where it is. Then we'll decide what to do. Don't 'disturb the grass and alert the snake'.”

Xu Ning listened in silence. He rose the next morning at dawn and sat brooding in the house.

At breakfast time, there was a knock at the courtyard gate. The orderly went to see who it was. He returned and announced: “Tang Long, son of the head of the Yanan garrison, is calling to pay his respects.”

Xu Ning directed that he be invited in. On seeing Xu Ning, Tang Long kowtowed.

“I trust all has been well with you, cousin,” he said.

“I heard my uncle had returned to Heaven,” Xu Ning replied. “I was tied down by official duties and your home is far away, so I never went to offer my condolences. I haven't had any news of you, either, cousin. Where have you been? What brings you here?”

“It's a long story. I've had bad luck since my father died, and wandered to many places. Today, I've come directly from Shandong to the capital to see you.”

“Cousin, stay a while,” said Xu Ning. He ordered that wine and food be brought for his guest.

Tang Long took from his pack two, long thin gold bars like scallion leaves, weighing twenty ounces, and presented them to Xu Ning.

“Before he died, my father asked me to give you these as a remembrance. There wasn't anybody I could trust to deliver them, so I've come today to hand them to you myself.”

“How very kind of uncle to think of me. I've done absolutely nothing to show my esteem. I'll never be able to express my gratitude.”

“Don't talk like that, cousin. Father was a great admirer of your skill with arms. He was sorry we lived so far apart and couldn't see each other. That's why he's left you these momentous.”

Xu Ning thanked Tang Long and accepted the gold bars. He had wine served and entertained him. But his brows were knit and he looked glum all the while they were drinking.

Finally, Tang Long rose and said: “You don't seem very happy, cousin. Is something troubling you?”

Xu Ning sighed. “Of course you don't know. It's a long story. Last night we were robbed.”

“Did you lose much?”

“Only the goose-feather metal-hooped armor known as 'lion's fur', left to me by my ancestors. But it's a remarkable suit, and last night it was taken. I'm very upset.”

“I've seen that armor. It really is beyond compare. My late father often praised it to the skies. Where were you keeping it?”

“In a leather box tied to the main beam in the bedroom. I can't imagine when the thief slipped in and got away with it.”

“What's the leather box like?”

“It's of red sheepskin, and the armor inside is wrapped in fragrant silk quilting.”

“A red sheepskin box?” Tang Long appeared startled. “Does it have cloud head sceptres stitched in white thread on the surface, with a lion playing with an embroidered ball in the middle?”

“Cousin, where have you seen it?”

“Last night I was drinking wine in a village tavern about forty *li* from the city. I saw a sharp-eyed thin swarthy fellow carrying it on a shoulder pole. I wondered what was in it. As I was leaving the tavern I asked him: 'What's that box for?' He said: 'Originally it held armor. But now it's only got a few garments.' That must be your man. He evidently has hurt his leg, because he walks with a limp. Why don't we go after him and catch him?”

“If we can do that, it will be a blessing from Heaven!”

“Let's not delay then. We'll go at once.”

Xu Ning quickly changed into hemp sandals, fastened his dagger, took his halberd, and left the city with Tang Long through the east gate. They strode swiftly along the winding road. Ahead they saw a tavern with a white circle on its wall.

“Let's have a bowl of wine,” Tang Long suggested. “We can inquire here.”

They went in and sat down. Tang Long asked the host: “Has a sharp-eyed dark thin fellow carrying a red sheepskin box passed this way?”

“There was a man like that last night. He seemed to have a bad leg, and was limping.”

“Did you hear that, cousin?” Tang Long exclaimed.

Xu Ning was beyond speech. The two paid for their wine and hurried through the door. Further on, they came to an inn. A white circle marked its wall. Tang Long halted.

“I can't go another step,” he said. “Why not spend the night here, and continue the chase early tomorrow morning?”

“I have official duties. If I'm not there for roll call I'll surely be reprimanded. What can I do?”

“You needn't worry about that, cousin. Your wife will explain, of course.”

At the inn that night they again made inquiries. The attendant told them: “Last night a thin swarthy fellow put up here. He slept late and didn't leave till mid-morning. He asked about the road to Shandong.”

“That means we can catch him,” said Tang Long.

The two men rested at the inn and departed before dawn, continuing along the winding road. Whenever they saw a white chalk circle on a wall, Tang Long called a halt for food and wine, and to ask the way. At each place they were told the same thing. Xu Ning was anxious to retrieve his armor, and he hastened along with Tang Long.

As daylight again began to wane, they saw ahead an ancient temple. In front of it, Shi Qian had rested his load and was sitting under a tree.

“Good,” exclaimed Tang Long. “There, cousin, beneath that tree, isn't that your red sheepskin box?”

Xu Ning looked, then rushed forward and seized Shi Qian. “Impudent scoundrel,” he roared. “How dare you steal my armor!”

“Stop, stop. Quit your yelling. Yes, I took your armor. What are you going to do about it?”

“Vulgar beast! You have the nerve to ask me that!”

“See if there's any armor in that box.”

Tang Long opened the container. It was empty.

“What have you done with my armor, rogue?” Xu Ning demanded.

“Now listen to me. My name is Zhang. I'm an eldest son and I come from Tai'an Prefecture. A wealthy man in our prefecture knows Old General Zhong of the Border Garrison and learned from him about your goose feather armor and that you don't want to sell. So he hired me and another man called Li the Third to steal it. He's paying us ten thousand strings of cash. When I jumped from that pole in your yard I sprained my leg and I can't walk fast. So I've let Li go on ahead with the armor and have kept only the box. If you pressure me and take me before the court, I won't say a word even if I'm beaten to death. But if you forgive me, I'll go with you and get it back.”

Xu Ning hesitated for several moments, unable to decide.

“There's no danger of him flying away, cousin,” said Tang Long. “Let's go with him and recover your armor. If he doesn't produce it, you can always state your case to the local magistrate.”

“That's quite true, cousin,” Xu Ning agreed.

The three men continued along the road and spent the night at an inn. Xu Ning and Tang Long kept an eye on Shi Qian. But Flea on a Drum had bandaged one leg as if it were sprained, and Xu Ning, thinking he couldn't walk very fast, wasn't especially watchful. The following morning they rose and went on. Shi Qian frequently bought them food and drink, by way of apology. They travelled all day.

The next morning Xu Ning was growing increasingly anxious. Was Shi Qian really leading them to the armor? During their march they came upon three or four horses hitched to an empty cart by the side of the road. Behind it stood the driver. A merchant stood to one side. When he saw Tang Long, he dropped to his knees and kowtowed.

“What are you doing here, brother?” Tang Long queried.

“I had some business in Zhengzhou,” the merchant replied. “I'm on my way back to Tai'an.”

“Excellent. We three would like a ride. We're going to Tai'an, too.”

“I wouldn't mind even if there were more of you, to say nothing of only three.”

Very pleased, Tang Long brought him over to Xu Ning.

“Who is this?” Xu Ning asked.

“I met him last year when I went to a temple in Tai'an to burn incense. His name is Li Rong and he's a righteous man.”

“Since Zhang can hardly walk, I suppose we'd better ride.” Xu Ning told the driver to start, and the four men got in the cart.

“Tell me the name of your rich patron,” Xu Ning demanded of Shi Qian.

Flea on a Drum stalled for a few minutes, then said: “He's called Lord Guo.”

“Do you have a Lord Guo in Tai'an?” Xu Ning asked Li Rong.

“Yes. He's a very wealthy man who hobnobs with big officials,” Li Rong replied. “He supports a whole bevy of hangers-on.”

Xu Ning said to himself: “Since there is such a person, I needn't be suspicious.

Li Rong chatted about play with weapons, and sang a few songs. The day passed quickly and pleasantly.

Soon they were only little more than two stages from Liangshan Marsh. Li Rong had the driver take the gourd and buy some wine and meat for his three passengers. Li filled a ladle and offered it to Xu Ning, who drained it at one go. Li called for more. The driver, pretending that his hand slipped, let the gourd drop, spilling its contents on the ground. Li shouted at him and ordered him to buy more wine.

Suddenly, Xu Ning began to drool from the corners of his mouth, and fell headlong in the cart. Who was Li Rong? Actually, he was Yue Ho the Iron Throat. He and the other two jumped down and hurried the horses on. They went directly to the tavern of Zhu Gui, the Dry-Land Crocodile, where they all carried Xu Ning to a boat and ferried him across to the Shore of Golden Sands. Song Jiang had already been informed, and had come down the mountain and was waiting with the other leaders.

Xu Ning by then awakened from the drug, and he was given an antidote. When he opened his eyes and saw the men standing around him, he was astonished.

“Cousin,” he said to Tang Long, “why have you duped me into coming here?”

“Listen to me, cousin,” said Tang Long. “I had heard that Song Jiang accepted bold men from all over. And so in Wugang Town I pledged myself a blood brother to Li Kui the Black Whirlwind and joined the forces in the stronghold. Now Huyan Zhuo is using linked cavalry against us on the battlefield and he's got us stymied. I proposed barbed lances, but you're the only one who knows how to wield them. So I thought of this scheme: Shi Qian was sent to steal your armor, and I tricked you to take to the road.

Then Yue Ho, disguised as Li Rong, put a drug in your wine when we were crossing a hill. Please come up to our mountain stronghold and become one of our leaders."

"Cousin, you've ruined me!"

Song Jiang advanced, wine cup in hand, and said apologetically: "I'm here in this marsh only temporarily, just waiting for an imperial amnesty so that I can repay our country with my utmost loyalty and strength. I'm not covetous, I don't like killing, and I never perform unrighteous or un-chivalrous deeds. I devoutly hope you will sympathize with me, Inspector, and join me in acting in Heaven's behalf."

Lin Chong also sought to mollify him. Cup in hand, he said: "I'm here, too, brother. Please don't refuse."

"You duped me into coming," Xu Ning said to Tang Long. "The authorities are sure to arrest my wife. What can I do?"

"Don't let that worry you, Inspector," said Song Jiang. "I personally guarantee her safety. In a few days you will be reunited."

Chao Gai, Wu Yong and Gongsun Sheng all apologized to Xu Ning, and a feast was laid in his honor. The most agile of the young brigands were selected to learn the use of the barbed lance. Dai Zong and Tang Long were dispatched to the Eastern Capital at all possible speed to fetch Xu Ning's family.

Within ten days Yang Lin brought Peng Qi's family from Yinzhou, Xue Yong brought Ling Zhen's family from the Eastern Capital, and Li Yun returned with five cartloads of gunpowder and explosives. A few days later Dai Zong and Tang Long led Xu Ning's family up the mountain. Amazed, Xu Ning asked how they had come.

"After you left and were unable to report for roll call, I dispensed a little money and jewelry as bribes," his wife related, "and said that you were sick in bed. So there wasn't any fuss. Then suddenly cousin Tang Long arrived with the goose feather armor. 'We got it back,' he said, 'but cousin fell ill on

the road, and he's lying in an inn at death's door. He wants to see you and the children.' I believed him, and we got into the cart. I don't know where we went, but we twisted and turned and ended up here."

"Everything else is fine," Xu Ning said to Tang Long. "It's just too bad my armor had to be left at home."

Tang Long laughed. "You'll be glad to hear, cousin, that after sister got in the cart, I went back into the house and got it. I also inveigled your serving girls into wrapping up all your valuables. I put them and your armor on a carrying pole and brought the whole lot."

"It looks as though we'll never be able to return to the Eastern Capital."

"There's one more thing I must tell you. We ran into a party of merchants on the way. I dressed in your armor and smeared my face. Using your name, I robbed them. By now the Eastern Capital must have sent out notices for your arrest."

"You've harmed me grievously, cousin!"

Chao Gai and Song Jiang offered words of apology. "If we hadn't done that, Inspector, would you have been willing to remain with us?" They allotted a house to Xu Ning and his family.

The leaders met to discuss how to deal with the linked cavalry of the enemy. By then the barbed lances manufactured under the supervision of Lei Heng were ready. Song Jiang and Wu Yong requested Xu Ning to teach their men how to use them.

"I'll gladly reveal all my secrets. I'll train your junior officers," said Xu Ning. "Let me have the most stalwart."

In Fraternity Hall the leaders watched Xu Ning select men to learn the use of the barbed lance.

And as a result, a force of three thousand armored horses was smashed, and a hero was taken within a designated time.

How then did Xu Ning teach the barbed lance arts? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 57
Xu Ning Teaches How to Use the Barbed Lance
Song Jiang Breaks the Linked-Up Cavalry

In Fraternity Hall, the chieftains requested Xu Ning to demonstrate the barbed lance. He was a fine figure of a man. Tall, broad-shouldered and thick at the middle, he had a round fair face adorned by a mustache and goatee. After selecting his trainees, he went outside the Hall, picked up a barbed lance and showed how it was done. The spectators cheered.

“If you're using this weapon on horseback,” he said, “you must swing from the waist. Advance in seven moves—three hooks and four parries. Then, one stab and one cleave. A total of nine changes. If you're on foot, the best way is to advance eight steps and parry four times. This will open the door. At the twelfth step, change. At the sixteenth, turn completely around, alternately hooking and stabbing. At the twenty-fourth, push your opponent's weapon up, then down. Hook to the east and parry to the west. At the thirty-sixth, making sure that you're well covered, seize the tough and fight the strong. This is the correct method of using the barbed lance. We have a jingle that goes:

Four parries, three hooks, seven in all,

Nine changes in total weave a magic spell,

At step twenty-four parry forward and back,

At step sixteen do a big turn as well.”

As Xu Ning demonstrated, stage by stage, the chieftains watched. The fighters were delighted by the way he plied the lance. From then on, he

taught the deftest of them day and night. He also showed infantry how to hide in brush and grass and snag the legs of horses, instructing them in three secret methods.

In less than half a month, he had taught five to seven hundred men. Song Jiang and the other leaders were extremely pleased. They made preparations to break the foe.

Huyan Zhuo, since the capture of Peng Qi and Ling Zhen, had been riding forth with his cavalry every day to the edge of the river and hurling challenges. But the brigand leaders near the shore only continued holding the various beach heads and installing sharp stakes under the water. Huyan was able to send scouts along the roads west and north of the mountain, but he had no way of getting to the stronghold.

Inside the brigand fortress Ling Zhen was directed to manufacture several types of cannon, and a day was set for the attack against the enemy. The men who had been learning the use of the barbed lance were by now quite adept.

“I'm neither clever nor far-sighted,” Song Jiang said to the other chieftains. “I wonder whether my idea will meet with your approval.”

“We'd like to hear it,” said Wu Yong.

“Tomorrow we won't use our cavalry, but will fight entirely on foot. The military tactics of Sun and Wu are very suited to wooded and watery areas. We'll take the infantry down, divide them into ten units and lure on the enemy. When they charge with their cavalry, we'll withdraw into the reeds and brush. Our men with the barbed lances will already be there lying in ambush. For every ten of these will be an equal number with big hooked poles. The lances will bring down the horses, the poles will snag the riders. We'll prepare similar ambushes on the open plain and in the narrow defiles. How does that plan strike you?”

“I think that's how we ought to do it,” said Wu Yong. “Conceal our soldiers and seize their officers.”

“Barbed lances and hooked poles together. Exactly the way,” said Xu Ning.

Song Jiang then formed ten infantry units, with two leaders in command of each to go down the mountain and lure the foe. Naval craft to serve as reinforcements were put under the command of nine chieftains. Six cavalry units were also dispatched under six chieftains. Their function was to shout challenges at the enemy from the side of the mountain. Ling Zhen and Du Xing were to have charge of the cannons.

Xu Ning and Tang Long were given leadership of the men with the barbed lances. The main army was under Song Jiang, Wu Yong, Gongsun Sheng, Dai Zong, Lu Fang and Guo Sheng. They issued all general orders and commands. The remaining chieftains were to defend the various forts.

That night at the third watch the barbed lancers crossed the river, spread out and went into ambush. At the fourth watch the ten infantry units moved across. Ling Zhen and Du Xing took with them Fiery Wind cannon and mountings, and set them up on a height. Xu Ning and Tang Long, as they crossed to the opposite shore, each carried a trumpet in a bag.

Dawn found Song Jiang and the main army lined up along the river. They beat drums, shouted and waved their banners.

When news of this reached Huyan Zhuo in the headquarters tent of his central army, he directed Han Tao of his vanguard to go out and scout. Then he ordered that the horses of his armored cavalry be linked together. He put on his armor, mounted his snowy-hoofed black steed, took up his double rods, and rode forth towards Liangshan Marsh with his men and horses.

He saw Song Jiang with a large force on the other side of the river and spread his troops out in battle formation. He conferred with Han Tao, who said: “They have a detachment of infantry, I don't know how large, due south of here.”

“Who cares how large! Charge them with our linked cavalry!”

Han Tao galloped forth with five hundred horsemen. But to the southeast another force of infantry appeared. Han Tao was about to send part of his

cavalry against them, when to the southwest he saw still another detachment, waving pennants and shouting. He pulled his entire unit back.

“There are three bandit detachments to the south,” he told Huyan. “They've all got Liangshan Marsh banners.”

“For a long time those rascals have refused to come out and fight,” Huyan mused. “They must be up to something.”

Before the words were out of his mouth, to the north was heard the boom of cannon. Huyan swore. “Ling Zhen has gone over to the bandits! They've got him to bombard us!”

While they were all watching south, three more units welled up in the north. “Those bandits surely are hatching some scheme,” Huyan said to Han Tao. “We'll divide our army in two. I'll fight north with one column, you fight south with the other.”

They were about to do this when four more enemy units appeared to the west. Huyan began to grow panicky. Northwards, a volley of cannon fire erupted, and projectiles landed upon the bluffs. They were shot from one large and forty-nine smaller cannons, which is why the battery was called Mother and Sons. The shells burst with an overpowering roar. Huyan's soldiers, confused before the combat even started, dashed wildly amid the cavalry and troops led by Han Tao.

The ten brigand infantry units ran east when chased east, and west when chased west. Huyan was furious. He advanced north with his army. Song Jiang's men plunged into the reeds. Huyan came tearing after them with a large contingent of linked cavalry. The armored steeds, galloping in tandem, could not be checked. They crashed in among the dry reeds, tall grass and tangled thickets. A shrill whistle rent the air, and barbed lances on both ends of the linked lines snagged the horses' legs and brought them tumbling to the ground. The animals in the middle whinnied in fright. Long poles snaked out of the reeds and hooked the riders.

Huyan, realizing he had been tricked, gave his horse free rein and raced back south after Han Tao. To the north behind him Fiery Wind cannon

thundered. Here, there, all over the hills and plain, brigand infantry gave chase. Linked armored cavalry rolled and fell everywhere amid the reeds and grasses, and everywhere were caught.

Han Tao and Huyan knew they had been duped. They rode madly about after their mounted men, seeking an escape route. But every path was thick as flax with the banners of Liangshan Marsh. No path was safe, and they headed northwest.

Before they had gone five or six *li* they were confronted by a strong unit with two bold fellows in the lead—Mu Hong the Unrestrained and Mu Chun the Slightly Restrained. Both carried halberds, and they shouted: “Defeated generals, stand where you are!”

Huyan, enraged, charged the two, brandishing his rods. They fought four or five rounds, then Mu Chun withdrew. Fearing a trap, Huyan did not pursue, but rode due north along the road.

Another powerful band came down the slope and blocked his way. It was led by Two-Headed Snake Xie Zhen and Twin-Tailed Scorpion Xie Bao. They raced towards him, each gripping a steel fork. Flourishing his rods, Huyan clashed with them in combat. They fought six or seven rounds, and the two brothers retreated. Huyan chased them less than half a *li* when from both sides suddenly twenty-four men with barbed lances surged forth. Huyan had no more heart for battle. He turned his mount and hurried off, northeast.

Again he was stopped, this time by Stumpy Tiger and Ten Feet of Steel, husband and wife. The road clearly was perilous, but the thorns and brambles on all sides were even worse. He kicked up his steed, brandished his rods, and charged through his interceptors. Stumpy Tiger and Ten Feet of Steel were unable to catch him. He rode pell-mell northeast, his army in ruins, his men scattered like raindrops and stars.

Song Jiang's trumpets sounded a return to the mountain, where each warrior came forward to claim his reward. Of the three thousand linked armored steeds, a troop and a half—brought down by the barbed lances —had their hoofs damaged. These were stripped of their armor and kept for eating

purposes. But the mounts of more than two troops were in fine condition. These were led up the mountain to be fed and cared for and used as brigand mounts. All the armor-bedecked cavalrymen were captured alive and taken to the stronghold.

Five thousand imperial infantry, pressed fiercely on three sides, tried to flee back into the midst of their main army, but were all brought down by the barbed lances and caught. Those who ran to the river were rounded up by the naval chieftains, put on boats, ferried across, and escorted up the mountain under guard. The men and horses previously captured by the imperial forces were recovered and returned to the fortress. Huyan's palisades were dismantled and new forts were built along the banks. Two inns were again erected to serve as eyes for the brigands, and as before Sun Xin, Mistress Gu, Shi Yong and Shi Qian were put in charge.

Liu Tang and Du Qian brought Han Tao to the stronghold, a bound captive. Song Jiang personally untied him and invited him into the Hall. He apologized and had a feast laid in his honor. Peng Qi and Ling Zhen, at Song's behest, urged him to join them. Han Tao, who originally was one of the stars of Earthly Fiends, was naturally of the same persuasion, and he promptly became a chieftain of Liangshan Marsh. Song Jiang had him write a letter to his family, then dispatched men to Chenzhou to bring them to the fortress, where they and Han Tao were reunited.

Song Jiang rejoiced. He had broken the linked cavalry, captured many men and horses, and collected large quantities of armor and weapons. Every day he and his cohorts feasted in celebration. But as usual they guarded all approaches against possible attack by imperial soldiers. Of that we'll say no more.

Huyan, having lost so much of his imperial army, dared not return to the capital. He rode alone on his black steed with the snowy hoofs, his armor hanging over the pommel as he hastened from the scene of his disaster. Without money, he had to take the gold belt from around his waist and sell it for silver.

“It happened so suddenly,” he said to himself. “Who can I look to for refuge?” Then he remembered. “Murong, the prefect of Qingzhou is an old friend. Why not go to him? His sister is an imperial concubine. If, through her influence, I can be given another army, I may still get my revenge.”

Towards evening of his second day on the road, he was hungry and thirsty. He dismounted at a village inn by the roadside and tied his horse to a tree near the front door. He went in, placed his rods on a table, sat down and told the host to bring wine and meat.

“We've only wine here,” said the host. “But they just slaughtered a sheep in the village. If you want meat, I'll buy you some.”

Huyan opened the ration bag at his waist and took out some of the silver he had exchanged for his gold belt. He gave his to the host.

“Get a leg of mutton and boil it for me. And mix some fodder and feed my horse. I'll spend the night here. Tomorrow, I'm going on to Qingzhou.”

“There's nothing against staying here, sir. But we don't have a good bed.”

“I'm a military man. Any place I can rest will do.”

The host took the silver and went off to purchase the mutton. Huyan removed his armor from his horse's back and loosened its girth straps, then sat down outside the door. He waited a long time. At last the host returned with the sheep leg. Huyan told him to boil it, knead three measures of flour for griddlecakes, and draw two drams of wine.

While the meat was cooking and the griddlecakes were on the pan, the host heated water for Huyan to wash his feet and led the horse to a shed in the rear. The host chopped grass and boiled fodder. Huyan warmed some wine and imbibed a while. Soon the meat was ready, and Huyan invited the host to eat and drink with him.

“I'm an officer of the imperial army,” Huyan said. “Because I've had a setback in arresting the bandits of Liangshan Marsh, I'm going to join Prefect Murong of Qingzhou. Take good care of my horse. It was given to

me by the emperor, and is called the Ebony Steed Which Treads in Snow. I'll reward you handsomely later on."

"Thank you, Excellency. But there is something I must tell you. Not far from here is Peach Blossom Mountain. On it is a band of robbers. Their leader is Li Zhong the Tiger-Fighting General. Second in command is Zhou Tong the Little King. There are about six or seven hundred of them, and they rob and pillage. Sometimes they raid this village. The authorities have sent soldiers to capture them time and again, but always without success. You must sleep lightly during the night, sir."

"I'm a man of matchless courage. Even if those knaves came in full force it wouldn't matter to me. Just make sure to feed my horse well."

He dined on meat and wine and griddlecakes. Then the host spread a pallet and Huyan lay down to sleep.

Because he had been depressed for several days, and because he had drunk a few cups of wine too many, Huyan reclined without taking his clothes off. Around the third watch he awakened. He heard the host, to the rear of the house, lamenting. Huyan jumped up, seized his twin rods and went into the back yard.

"What's the trouble?" he demanded.

"I went out to add some hay and I found that the fence had been knocked down. Someone has stolen Your Excellency's horse! Look, there —torch light three or four *li* off in the distance. They must be heading for that place."

"What place are you talking about?"

"The robbers you see on that road are bandits from Peach Blossom Mountain!"

Huyan was startled. He ordered the host to lead the way, and they gave chase for two or three *li* along the edges of the fields. But the torches had vanished. There was no telling where they had gone.

“This is terrible,” said Huyan. “I've lost the emperor's gift horse!”

“Go into the prefecture tomorrow and report the theft,” advised the host. “They'll send soldiers to catch the robbers. That's the only way you'll get the animal back.”

Sunk in gloom, Huyan sat until daybreak. Then he set out for Qingzhou, instructing the host to carry his armor. It was dark by the time they reached the city, and they put up at an inn for the night. Early the following morning Huyan presented himself at the prefectural court and kowtowed before Murong.

The prefect was astonished. “I heard that you had gone to catch the bandits in Liangshan Marsh, General,” he said. “What are you doing here?”

Huyan related what had transpired.

“Although you lost many men and horses, it was not through lack of diligence,” said Murong. “The bandits tricked you. It wasn't your fault. The area under my administration has often been raided by them. Now that you're here you can first clean out Peach Blossom Mountain and retake the steed presented you by the emperor. Then you can capture the robbers on Two-Dragon Mountain and White Tiger in one fell swoop. I'll report your exploits to the emperor, and you'll again be given command of an army and can get your revenge. How will that be?”

Huyan again kowtowed. “I'm deeply grateful for your concern. If you'll be kind enough to do this, I'll repay you with my life.”

Murong invited him to accept temporary quarters in a guestroom, where he could change his clothes, eat and rest. The prefect told the host who had been carrying Huyan's armor to return home.

Three days passed. Huyan, anxious to retrieve the imperial gift horse, entreated Murong to give him soldiers. The prefect mustered two thousand infantry and cavalry, which he put under Huyan's leadership, and presented him with a black-maned charger. Huyan thanked him, donned his armor,

mounted, and marched off with his men to recapture his horse, heading straight for Peach Blossom Mountain.

On the mountain Li Zhong the Tiger-Fighting General and Zhou Tong the Little King, having obtained the Ebony Steed Which Treads in Snow, feasted and celebrated every day. A scout who watched the road reported: “Soldiers and horses from Qingzhou heading this way.”

Zhou Tong rose and said to Li Zhong: “Brother, hold the fort. I'll go and drive back the government forces.”

He mustered a hundred brigands, took his lance, mounted, and rode down to meet the foe.

Huyan Zhuo approached the mountain with two thousand infantry and cavalry and spread out in battle position. Riding forth, he shouted: “Robbers, come and be bound!”

Zhou Tong the Little King deployed his men in a single line and cantered out with levelled lance. Huyan gave his mount rein and advanced to do battle. Zhou Tong spurred his animal. Soon the two horses drew together.

The riders fought six or seven rounds. Zhou Tong wasn't strong enough. He pulled his steed around and headed up the slope. Huyan chased him a while. But he was afraid of being tricked. He rode hastily down the mountain and set up a camp. There he waited for the next opportunity to fight.

Zhou Tong returned to his stronghold. “Huyan Zhuo is a highly skilled warrior,” he told Li Zhong. “I couldn't stop him. I had no choice but to come back. If he pursues right to our fort, what can we do?”

“I hear that Sagacious Lu the Tattooed Monk is in the Precious Pearl Monastery on Two-Dragon Mountain with a large band of men. With him, what's more, is some fellow called Yang Zhi the Blue-Faced Beast, and a newly arrived pilgrim Wu Song. They're all formidable fighters. I'll send a letter requesting their aid. If we get out of this danger thanks to their efforts, I'll be glad to pay them tribute every month.”

“I've known about those brave fellows for some time. I'm just afraid that monk still remembers the first time we met, and won't want to help.”

Li Zhong laughed. “Never mind. He's a good man, very forthright. When he learns of the fix we're in, he'll sure come with warriors to the rescue.”

“Yes, that's true.”

The letter was written and two competent brigands were picked to deliver it. They rolled down the rear slope and struck out for Two-Dragon Mountain. They reached the foot of it in only two days. The brigands on guard there questioned them closely on the nature of their business.

Three chieftains sat in the main hall of the Precious Pearl Monastery. Sagacious Lu the Tattooed Monk was first in command. Yang Zhi the Blue-Faced Beast was second. Third was Wu Song the Pilgrim.

In the building at the entry gate were four lesser chiefs. One was Shi En the Golden-Eyed Tiger Cub. The son of the warden of Mengzhou Prison at the time Wu Song killed General Zhang and his entire family, he and his father had been made responsible for apprehending the culprit. Rather than do this, Shi En had abandoned his home and fled. For some time he was a wanderer. Later, his parents died, and he heard that Wu Song was on Two-Dragon Mountain. He had hurried to join him.

Another lesser chief was Cao Zheng the Demon Carver. He had been with Sagacious Lu and Yang Zhi when they took Precious Pearl Monastery and killed Deng Long. He too subsequently joined the band.

The third was Zhang Qing the Vegetable Gardener. The fourth was Sun the Witch. These two, husband and wife, had sold dumplings stuffed with human flesh at Crossroads Rise on the Mengzhou Road. They had joined in response to repeated letters from Sagacious Lu and Wu Song.

Cao Zheng, hearing that there was a letter from Peach Blossom Mountain, carefully questioned the messengers, then went up to the hall and reported to the three chieftains.

“When I left Mount Wutai I put up in Peach Blossom Village, and there I gave that prick Zhou Tong a good drubbing,” Lu recalled. “Then Li Zhong came and recognized me. He invited me up to their mountain for a day of drinking. He pledged me his blood brother and wanted me to stay and be their chieftain. But the stinginess of those two annoyed me. I collected some of their gold and silver drinking vessels and left. Now they send messengers pleading for aid. Let them come up. We'll hear what they have to say.”

Cao Zheng soon returned with the two emissaries. They hailed the chieftains respectfully and said: “Murong, prefect of Qingzhou, has recently been entertaining Two Rods Huyan Zhuo, who failed in an attack on Liangshan Marsh. The prefect has sent him to clean out our mountain strongholds on Peach Blossom, Two-Dragon and White Tiger, so that he may be given another army and take Liangshan and get his revenge. Our leaders beseech you great chieftains to come with armed forces and save us. When all this is over, we will be glad to pay tribute.”

“We defend our own mountain and fortress. As a rule we don't go to anyone's rescue,” Yang Zhi said to Wu Song and the Tattooed Monk. “But if we don't help, we'll damage the prestige of the gallant fraternity, for one thing. For another, if we let that lout capture Peach Blossom Mountain, he'll look on us with contempt. Let's leave Zhang Qing, Sun the Witch, Shi En and Cao Zheng to hold the fort. Then we three can take a little trip.”

He mustered five hundred foot soldiers and sixty cavalrymen. Each donned his armor and equipment, and all headed for Peach Blossom Mountain.

When Li Zhong heard the news from Two-Dragon Mountain, he led three hundred brigands down as reinforcements. Huyan Zhuo rushed his entire complement to block their path. He deployed his men and, brandishing his rods, rode out against Li Zhong.

Li was from Dingyuan in Haozhou Prefecture, where his family, for generations, had earned their livelihood by their skill at arms. Because of his stalwart physique, he was known as the Tiger-Fighting General. But in his clash with Huyan he discovered he had met his match. After ten rounds

or so, he could see it was going badly. He parried his adversary's weapons and fled.

Huyan, with a low opinion of Li's fighting ability, chased him up the mountain. Zhou Tong the Little King was at mid-point on the slope. He promptly threw down stones like goose eggs. Huyan hurriedly turned his mount and returned to the foot of the mountain. He found his government soldiers shouting in alarm.

“What are you yelling about?” he demanded.

“There, in the distance. A body of men and horses racing this way!” exclaimed the rear guard.

Huyan looked beyond them. A big fat monk on a white horse was leading a contingent, trailed by a rising cloud of dust. It was Sagacious Lu the Tattooed Monk.

“Where is that prick who was beaten at Liangshan Marsh?” he was roaring. “How dare you come here and bluster?”

“I'm going to kill you first, bald donkey,” Huyan responded, “to work off the rage inside me!”

Lu twirled his iron Buddhist staff, Huyan waved his rods, the horses met, the opposing forces shouted. The two men fought forty or fifty rounds with neither emerging the victor.

“This monk is fantastic,” Huyan marvelled to himself.

On both sides trumpets blared and the contestants withdrew to rest. But after a short interval, Huyan grew impatient. Again he rode his steed into the arena. “Come out, thief of a monk,” he cried. “Let's fight to a finish!”

Lu was about to meet the challenge when Yang Zhi said: “Rest a bit longer, brother. Watch me nab this oaf!”

Waving his sabre, he rode forth and clashed with Huyan. Forty or fifty rounds they fought with neither vanquishing the other.

Huyan was filled with admiration. “Where did they get two like these?” he wondered. “Truly remarkable. They never learned such jousting in the greenwood!”

Impressed by Huyan's superb skill with arms, Yang Zhi broke off the engagement, turned his horse and galloped back to his position. Huyan didn't give chase, but also turned his mount around. Both sides withdrew their forces.

“This is our first venture here,” Sagacious Lu said to Yang Zhi. “We'd better not camp too close to them. Let's pull back another twenty *li.* We'll come out and fight again tomorrow.”

With their men, they crossed to a nearby hollow and there set up a camp.

Huyan brooded in his tent. “I expected taking this gang of cheap robbers would be as easy as snapping bamboo,” he thought. “Who knew I'd ran into such adversaries. What rotten luck!”

He could see no way out of his dilemma. Just then a messenger arrived from Prefect Murong.

“The General is ordered to return at once with his soldiers and defend the city,” the man said. “Bandits from White Tiger Mountain under Kong Ming and Kong Liang are on their way to raid the prison. To prevent anything from happening to the prefectural government, the General is requested to hurry back with his forces.”

This was just the excuse Huyan was looking for. He set out for Qingzhou with his infantry and cavalry that very night.

The next day Sagacious Lu, Yang Zhi and Wu Song led their brigands, waving banners and yelling, down the mountain. To their astonishment, there was not a sign of their foe. Li Zhong and Zhou Tong came down with men from their own mountain and invited the three chieftains to their stronghold. There, they slaughtered sheep and horses and spread a feast in their honor. At the same time they dispatched scouts to find out what was happening on the road beyond.

As Huyan was leading his contingent back to the city he saw a body of men and horses already on the outskirts of Qingzhou. At their head were Kong Ming the Comet and Kong Liang the Flaming Star—sons of Squire Kong who lived at the foot of White Tiger Mountain. In a quarrel with a local rich man, they had slaughtered him and his entire household. Next, they gathered six or seven hundred men, occupied White Tiger Mountain, and took to pillage and plunder. Prefect Murong arrested their uncle Kong Bin, who lived in the city and threw him into jail. They had been heading for Qingzhou to get him out. Now, they found themselves confronted by Huyan Zhuo and his contingent.

The two sides spread out and engaged in battle. Huyan rode to the front of his position. Prefect Murong, watching from a tower on the city wall, saw Kong Ming, with levelled lance astride a charger, attack Huyan. They met and fought over twenty rounds. Huyan wanted to display his prowess before the prefect. He noted that Kong Ming, whose skill with arms was not exceptional, was now entirely on the defensive. Huyan drove in close and snatched him off his horse.

Kong Liang and his men turned and fled. Murong, from the tower, shouted for Huyan to go after them. The government soldiers pressed hard and captured more than a hundred of the foe. Badly defeated, Kong Liang and the rest of his forces ran in all directions. Towards evening, they put up in an ancient temple.

After capturing Kong Ming, Huyan led him into the city and presented himself before the prefect. Murong was delighted. He directed that a rack be placed around the prisoner's neck, and that he be confined in the same jail as his uncle Kong Bin. The prefect rewarded the troops and entertained Huyan. He asked about the brigands on Peach Blossom Mountain.

“I thought I had only to stretch out my hand and take them, as easily as catching turtles in a jug,” said Huyan. “But unexpectedly a band of robbers came to their rescue. Among them was a monk and a big blue-faced fellow. I fought them both, but couldn't defeat either. Their skill is out of the

ordinary. It's not the usual style of robbers in the greenwood. So I was prevented from capturing the bandits.”

“That monk,” said Murong, “is Lu Da, who was an major under Governor-General Zhong of the Yanan border region. Later, he shaved off his hair and became a monk, and he's now known as Sagacious Lu the Tattooed Monk. The big fellow with blue tinged complexion was once an aide in the palace in the Eastern Capital. He's called Yang Zhi the Blue-Faced Beast. Their third leader is Wu Song, known as the Pilgrim. He's the Constable Wu who killed the tiger on Jingyang Ridge.

“These three occupy Two-Dragon Mountain, from where they rob and plunder. We've sent troops to catch them several times, but they killed four or five of our officers. We haven't caught one of them to this day!”

“Their skill is superb. So that's who they are—Palace Aide Yang and Major Lu. They certainly deserve their reputation! But don't worry, Excellency. You have me here. I'll nab every one of them and turn them over!”

The prefect was very pleased. He gave a feast in Huyan's honor, then invited him to rest in a guest-house. Of that we'll say no more.

Kong Liang was leading the remnants of his beaten unit along the road. Suddenly, a band of men and horses emerged from among the trees. The bold fellow at their head was Wu Song the Pilgrim. Kong Liang rolled from his saddle and kowtowed.

“I trust all has gone well with you, sir warrior!”

Wu Song hastily returned the salutation. He raised Kong Liang to his feet.

“I heard you two brothers had occupied White Tiger Mountain and formed a righteous gathering,” he said. “Several times I intended to pay my respects. But I wasn't able leave our stronghold, and the road to your place is difficult, so I couldn't get to see you. What brings you here today?”

Kong Liang told how his brother was captured while trying to rescue their uncle Kong Bin.

“Don't be upset, friend,” said Wu Song. “I have six or seven brothers with me in our band on Two-Dragon Mountain. The other day Li Zhong and Zhou Tong on Peach Blossom Mountain were strongly attacked by government troops from Qingzhou, and they asked for our assistance. Lu and Yang went with some of our forces and fought Huyan Zhuo all day. For some reason, he and his men suddenly left in the night. The Peach Blossom Mountain people feasted Lu and Yang and me and presented us with a snowy hoofed steed. I'm taking our first contingent back to our stronghold. Lu and Yang are following and will soon be here. I'll tell them to raid Qingzhou and save your uncle and brother. How will that be?”

Kong Liang thanked Wu Song. After a considerable wait, Sagacious Lu and Yang Zhi arrived with their cavalry. Wu Song introduced Kong Liang.

“I once met Song Jiang in his manor and put him to a lot of trouble,” Wu said. “Today, for the sake of chivalry, we can combine the forces of the three mountain strongholds, attack Qingzhou, kill the prefect, capture Huyan Zhuo, and divide the money and grain in the storehouses for the use of our various bands. What do you say?”

“Just what I was thinking,” asserted Sagacious Lu. “Let's notify Peach Blossom Mountain, and ask Li Zhong and Zhou Tong to bring their men. The three bands can strike Qingzhou together.”

“It's a sturdily built city, its armed forces are strong, and Huyan Zhuo is a courageous fellow,” mused Yang Zhi. “I don't mean to disparage us, but if you want to succeed you'd better take my advice.”

“Let's hear your strategy, brother,” said Wu Song.

Yang Zhi spoke briefly, he wasted no words.

And as a result, smoke rose from the ruins of every house of the citizens of Qingzhou, and the heroes of the Marsh ground their fists into their palms as they advanced belligerently.

How did Yang Zhi propose to Wu Song that Qingzhou should be attacked? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 58
Three Mountain Bands Attack Qingzhou
Warriors United Return to the Marsh

“A large force is needed to take Qingzhou,” said Yang Zhi. “We know that the famous Song Jiang, called the Timely Rain in the gallant fraternity, is in Liangshan Marsh. Huyan Zhuo is his enemy. Our Two-Dragon Mountain band will co-operate with the Kong brothers' band. We will wait here till the men from Peach Blossom Mountain arrive, and go with them to assault the town. Brother Kong Liang, you must travel at top speed to Mount Liangshan and beseech Song Jiang to join our attack. That is the best plan, because you and he are great friends. What do you brothers think?”

“Sounds all right to me,” said Sagacious Lu. “I've heard a lot of good things about Song Jiang, though I'm sorry to say we've never met. People chatter about him so much they've nearly made me deaf. He must be quite a man, to be so famous. I went to see him when he was with Hua Rong in Fort Clear Winds. But by the time I got there, he was gone. Never mind. Kong Liang, you want to rescue your brother. You'd better hurry and ask Song Jiang's help. We'll stay here and start the battle against those pricks.”

Kong Liang directed his men to remain with Sagacious Lu. He took only one companion. Disguised as a merchant, he set out swiftly for Liangshan Marsh.

Sagacious Lu, Yang Zhi and Wu Song went to their mountain strongholds and fetched Shi En and Cao Zheng and about two hundred fighters. On Peach Blossom Mountain when Li Zhong and Zhou Tong received the news they brought their entire force, except for forty or fifty left to hold the fort. All contingents converged outside the town and prepared for the assault. Of that we'll say no more.

On leaving Qingzhou, Kong Liang followed a winding road till he came to the tavern on the edge of Liangshan Marsh run by LiLi, who was called Hell's Summoner. There he stopped to buy some wine and ask the way. Kong Liang and his companion were strangers to Li. He invited them to be seated.

“Where are you from?” he queried.

“Qingzhou,” said Kong Liang.

“Who is it you wish to see in the Marsh?”

“A friend of mine, on the mountain.”

“Important chieftains live in that fortress on the mountain. How can you go there?”

“It's a chieftain I'm seeking—Song Jiang.”

“In that case I have an obligation to you.” LiLi ordered his attendants to serve wine.

“We've never met,” said Kong Liang. “Why so courteous?”

“Anyone seeking a chieftain in the fortress is sure to be one of our kind, an old friend. He must be properly received and his arrival reported.”

“I am Kong Liang, from a manor at the foot of White Tiger Mountain.”

“I've heard brother Song Jiang mention you. We'll escort you to the stronghold today.”

The two drank ceremonial cups of wine. LiLi opened a window overlooking the water and shot a whistling arrow. From the reeds on the opposite side of the cove a brigand propelled a boat. It stopped beside the tavern. LiLi invited Kong Liang on board. The craft was sculled to the Shore of Golden Sands, and the men began to climb.

Kong Liang was impressed by the bristling array of weapons at each of the three gates through which they had to pass. “I heard that the stronghold was well equipped,” he said to himself, “but I never thought it was on such a scale!”

Brigands had gone ahead to report, and Song Jiang came down to greet him. Kong Liang hastily knelt and kowtowed.

“What brings you here, brother?” Song Jiang asked. Kong Liang burst into tears. Song Jiang said: “If you're in any danger or difficulty, don't hesitate to speak. We'll help you, no matter what it is. Brother, please rise.”

“After we parted, my old father died. My brother Kong Ming quarreled with a well-to-do neighbor and killed him and his entire family. The authorities were hot on his trail, so we went up White Tiger Mountain and formed a band of six or seven hundred. We lived by robbery and pillage. Murong, the prefect of Qingzhou, arrested Kong Bin, our uncle whose home was in town, and threw him into prison with a heavy rack around his neck. My brother and I staged a raid to rescue him, but outside the walls we were met by Huyan Zhuo who wields two rods. Brother fought, and Huyan captured him. They took him into Qingzhou and put him in prison also. There's no guarantee they won't kill him.

“I was chased and had to run. The next day, I met Wu Song. He introduced me to his companions. One was Sagacious Lu the Tattooed Monk. The other was Yang Zhi the Blue-Faced Beast. We were like old friends the moment we met. We discussed the rescue of my brother. Wu Song said: 'We'll ask Lu and Yang to get Li Zhong and Zhou Tong from Peach Blossom Mountain, and join the forces from three strongholds in an attack on Qingzhou. You hurry to Mount Liangshan and request Song Jiang to help save your uncle and your brother.' That's why I'm here. I pray, for the sake of my departed father, that you rescue them. I'll be eternally grateful.”

“It will be easy. Don't worry. Come pay your respects to our leader Chao Gai. We'll talk it over together.”

Song Jiang presented Kong Liang to Chao Gai, Wu Yong, Gongsun Sheng, and the other chieftains. He related that Huyan Zhuo had gone to Qingzhou and cast his lot in with Prefect Murong and had recently captured Kong Ming, and that Kong Liang was seeking his rescue.

Chao Gai said: “Since the two brave brothers out of chivalry and righteousness, desire to rescue their uncle, and since you, brother Song, are their friend, we should indeed assist them. But you've ridden forth on expeditions many times, brother. This time you hold the fort and let me go.”

“You're our highest leader. We mustn't lightly put you to any trouble,” said Song Jiang. “This is a personal matter. Kong Liang has come all this distance to see me. He'd be embarrassed if I didn't go personally. I'd prefer to handle this alone with a few of our brothers.”

Immediately, chieftains high and low pushed forward and volunteered. “We'll give our all,” they cried. “Only take us along!”

Song Jiang was very pleased. That day a feast was given for Kong Liang, and Song Jiang direct Pei Xuan to muster men for the expedition and divide them into five contingents. The vanguard was to be led by Hua Rong, Qin Ming, Yan Shun and Stumpy Tiger Wang. The second unit was under Mu Hong, Yang Xiong, Xie Zhen and Xie Bao. The chief generals Song Jiang, Wu Yong, Lu Fang and Guo Sheng commanded the central force. The fourth contingent was headed by Zhu Tong, Chai Jin, Li Jun and Zhang Heng, while the unit bringing up the rear was under Sun Li, Yang Lin, Ou Peng and Ling Zhen.

When the five battalions were mustered they had fighters on horse and on foot totalling three thousand, under twenty commanders. The other chieftains remained with Chao Gai to hold the fortress. Song Jiang took his leave of Chao Gai and went down the mountain with Kong Liang and the brigand force.

Their march was uneventful, and they harmed none of the prefectures and counties along the way. They soon reached Qingzhou. Kong Liang went on ahead and informed Sagacious Lu. The Tattooed Monk and his companions prepared a welcome. When Song Jiang and his central battalion arrived, Wu Song led Sagacious Lu, Yang Zhi, Li Zhong, Zhou Tong, Shi En and Cao Zheng forward to greet him. Song asked Sagacious to be seated.

“I've long known of your fame, brother,” said the monk, “but I never had the chance to pay my respects. I'm very happy to meet you today.”

“I don't deserve such courtesy,” Song Jiang protested. “In the gallant fraternity your virtue is well known, Reverend. To be able to look upon your benevolent face is the greatest joy of my life!”

Yang Zhi rose and bowed. “I passed through Liangshan Marsh earlier,” he said, “and the chieftains were kind enough to ask me to stay. But I stupidly declined. Today, you call here within sight of our mountain lair. Nothing under Heaven could please me more!”

“Everyone in the gallant fraternity has heard of Yang Zhi. My only regret is that we hadn't met sooner!”

Sagacious Lu ordered that wine be served, and introductions were made all around.

The next day Song Jiang asked about the situation in the prefectural town.

“After Kong Liang left, we had four or five clashes, with no clear result,” said Yang Zhi. “Qingzhou's mainstay is Huyan Zhuo. If we capture him, we can push into that town like hot water through snow.”

Wu Yong laughed. “He can be taken, but by guile, not by force.”

“How do you propose to do it?” Song Jiang asked.

Wu Yong softly outlined his plan. Song Jiang was delighted.

“Very shrewd!”

That day he issued his instructions, and the next morning they proceeded to the walls of Qingzhou. They surrounded the town, beat their drums, waved their pennants, shouted, and shook their weapons. Murong was informed, and he hurriedly summoned Huyan Zhuo.

“Those bandits have brought help from Liangshan Marsh. What are we going to do?” demanded the prefect.

“Don't worry, Your Excellency,” said Huyan. “By coming here they've lost their favorable terrain. It's only in the marsh that they can act up. Now that they've left their lair, we can nab them as fast as they come. They've nowhere to deploy. Please go up on the ramparts, Prefect, and watch me slaughter those rogues!”

Huyan quickly donned his armor and mounted his charger. He shouted for the gates to be opened and the drawbridge to be lowered. He rode forth at the head of a thousand infantry and cavalry, and spread them out in battle formation. From Song Jiang's contingent a horseman emerged. He was carrying a wolf-toothed cudgel. In a stentorian voice he cursed the prefect.

“Grafter! People-injuring thief! You've destroyed my home, and today I'm going to get my revenge!”

Murong recognized Qin Ming. “You were an officer of the imperial court,” he shouted. “The state treated you well. How dare you rebel! When I capture you I'll have you smashed into ten thousand pieces! Nab that outlaw for me, first!” he yelled to Huyan.

Flourishing his rods, Huyan rode towards his objective. Qin Ming gave his steed full rein and galloped to meet Huyan, waving his wolf-toothed cudgel. They were a well-matched pair, and they fought nearly fifty rounds with neither vanquishing the other.

Murong felt the contest was lasting too long. He was afraid Huyan would lose. Hurriedly, he had the gongs summon his troops back to the town. Qin Ming did not pursue the departing foe, but returned to his own position. Song Jiang instructed his commanders to withdraw fifteen *li* and make camp.

Inside the town, Huyan got off his horse and reported to the prefect. “I was about to take that Qin Ming,” he said. “Why did you sound retreat, Your Excellency?”

“You'd fought many rounds. I feared you were tired, so I called our forces back to rest, temporarily. Before he and Hua Rong rebelled, Qin Ming was commanding general here. The knave is hot to be underestimated.”

“I'll take that treacherous bandit, Your Excellency, rest assured. When I fought him just now he was getting clumsy with his rods. Next time, watch me smash him!”

“I know what a hero you are. But tomorrow, I want you to break open a gap in the enemy lines so that I can send out three men. I shall dispatch one to the Eastern Capital to ask for assistance, and two to neighboring districts and prefectures to raise troops to help capture the bandits.”

“Your Excellency is indeed far-sighted.”

The prefect wrote out a request for assistance, selected three officers, and made the necessary arrangements.

Huyan returned to his quarters, removed his armor and rested. Before dawn the next day an officer entered and reported: “On a hill outside the north gate three horsemen are observing the town. The one in the middle is wearing a red gown and is riding a white steed. The man on the right is Hua Rong. We don't recognize the man on the left, but he's dressed as a Taoist.”

“That man in red is Song Jiang. The Taoist must be his general, Wu Yong. Don't alert them. Muster a hundred cavalry and bag all three.”

Huyan hastily put on his armor and mounted. Rods in hand, leading his hundred horsemen, he had the north gate quietly opened and the drawbridge lowered, and rode swiftly towards the hill. Song Jiang, Wu Yong and Hua Rong continued staring at the town. Huyan raced up the slope. Only then did the three turn their mounts and walk them slowly away.

Before a grove of withered trees they again reined in. In hot pursuit, Huyan had just raced to the edge of the grove when shouts rang out and horse and rider dropped into a concealed pit. From both sides fifty or sixty men snared Huyan with hooked poles, hauled him out, and tied him up. Others extracted his horse.

By then the rest of Huyan's troop came charging up. Calmly fitting arrows to his bow, Hua Rong brought down the first five or six. Those behind halted abruptly, yanked their steeds around and, yelling, galloped off.

Song Jiang returned to camp and took his seat. Knife-wearing attendants pushed Huyan Zhuo before him. Song immediately rose and ordered that

his bonds be removed. He personally conducted Huyan to a chair and greeted him respectfully.

“Why are you doing this?” Huyan asked.

“Would I be ungrateful to the imperial court?” Song Jiang retorted. “I was hard pressed by corrupt officials and forced to commit a crime. I've had to seek refuge in this marsh while awaiting an imperial pardon. I never expected to stir into action so mighty a general, for whom I have such great admiration. It was very wrong of me, and I beg your forgiveness.”

“I am your prisoner. Ten thousand deaths would be too light a punishment. Yet you treat me with such courtesy!”

“Never would I presume to harm you. Heaven is my witness.”

“Is it your wish, respected brother, that I should go to the Eastern Capital and ask for a royal pardon to bring to your mountain?”

“You couldn't possibly do that, General! Marshal Gao is a narrow-hearted villain. He forgets a man's large accomplishments and remembers only his small failings. You've lost a lot of troops, money and grain. He'd surely hold you culpable. Han Tao, Peng Qi and Ling Zhen have all joined our band. If you don't scorn our mountain stronghold as too humble, I'd be happy to relinquish to you my place as chieftain. When the court has use for us and issues its imperial pardon, we can once again serve our country with our utmost efforts.”

Huyan hesitated for several minutes. But, firstly, since he was one of the stars of Heavenly Spirits, he naturally was of the same chivalrous mentality. And, secondly, he was overwhelmed by Song Jiang's courtesy and reasonableness. With a sigh, he knelt.

“It's not that I lack loyalty to the government. But your exceeding gallantry leaves me no choice but to agree. I'll follow you faithfully. The situation being what it is, there's no alternative.”

Song Jiang was very pleased. He introduced Huyan to the other chieftains and directed Li Zhong and Zhou Tong to return his mount the Ebony Steed Which Treads in Snow. Then the chieftains conferred on how to rescue Kong Ming.

Wu Yong said: “If Huyan can trick them into opening the gates, we'll take the town easily. It will also put an end to any thought he may have of rejoining them.”

Song Jiang went to Huyan and said: “It's not loot I'm after, but Kong Ming and his uncle are imprisoned in Qingzhou. We can't save them unless you get the town to open the gates.”

“Since you've been kind enough to accept me, of course I'll do my best.”

That night ten chieftains disguised themselves as government troops and rode forth with Huyan at their head. At the town moat they halted.

“Open the gates,” shouted the general. “I've escaped and returned!”

Soldiers on the wall recognized Huyan's voice and hastily reported to Murong. The prefect had been brooding over the loss of the general. Now, hearing that he had come back, Murong was delighted. He jumped on his horse and rode to the town wall. He saw Huyan with about a dozen mounted men. He couldn't make out their faces in the dark, but he knew the general's voice.

“How were you able to return?” Murong called.

“Those knaves trapped my horse and took me to their camp. Some of my commanders sneaked this mount to me, and we got away together.”

Murong ordered his soldiers to open the gates and lower the drawbridge. As the chieftains entered the town, he came forward to greet them. With one blow of his cudgel, Qin Ming knocked the prefect from his saddle. The Xie brothers set the town to the torch. Ou Peng and Stumpy Tiger Wang dashed up the wall and killed or scattered the defenders.

Song Jiang and the main force, seeing that Qingzhou was on fire, surged in. He transmitted an urgent order that the townspeople were not to be harmed, but to empty the town's treasury and grain stores. Kong Ming and his uncle and Kong Bin's family were rescued from the prison. Song Jiang directed that the fires be extinguished. The prefect's entire family, young and old, were killed, and all their possessions distributed among the marauders.

At daybreak a count was made of those families whose homes had been damaged by the fires, and they were given grain as relief payments. The money and grain taken from government stores came to nearly six hundred cartloads. Over two hundred good horses were also captured. A great feast of celebration was held in the main hall of the prefectural government, and the leaders of the three mountain strongholds were invited to go together to the fortress on Mount Liangshan.

Li Zhong and Zhou Tong sent people to Peach Blossom Mountain with orders to collect men and horses, and as much money and grain as possible, and then set fire to the stronghold and abandon it. Sagacious Lu dispatched Shi En and Cao Zheng to Two-Dragon Mountain. There, with Zhang Qing and his wife Sun the Witch, they assembled the brigands, loaded their money and grain, and burned down their stronghold in Precious Pearl Monastery.

In a few days time, the forces from the three mountains completed their preparations, and the entire body, led by Song Jiang, set out for the Mount Liangshan fortress. Song put Hua Rong, Qin Ming, Huyan Zhuo and Zhu Tong in the van to clear the way. Not a single prefecture or county was harmed during the march. Villagers, carrying their babes and supporting their old folk, burned incense and kowtowed in greeting.

The cavalcade reached Liangshan Marsh several days later. Chieftains of the water forces met them with boats, and Chao Gai and the leaders of the infantry and cavalry were awaiting them when they landed on the Shore of Golden Sands. They climbed together to the big stronghold, entered Fraternity Hall and took their seats.

A big feast was laid to celebrate the addition of twelve new chieftains: Huyan Zhuo, Sagacious Lu, Yang Zhi, Wu Song, Shi En, Cao Zheng, Zhang

Qing, Sun the Witch, Li Zhong, Zhou Tong, Kong Ming and Kong Liang. Lin Chong rose and thanked Sagacious Lu for his aid in the rescue.

“I've thought about you a lot after we parted in Cangzhou,” said the monk. “Has there been any news of your wife?”

“After I took over from Wang Lun, I sent someone home to fetch her. He found that Marshal Gao's wicked son had kept after her so hard that she finally killed herself. Her father was very depressed, and took ill and died.”

Yang Zhi related how he met with Lin Chong when Wang Lun was still in control of the lair. All agreed that this had been fated. It was no accident. Chao Gai told the story of the capture of the birthday gifts on Yellow Earth Ridge. Everyone laughed heartily.

More feasts were given for several successive days. Of that we'll say no more.

The fortress had been strengthened by many men and horses, and Song Jiang was exceedingly pleased. He ordered Tang Long to oversee all metalwork and manufacture many kinds of weapons and armor. Hou Jian, who he put in charge of banners and clothing, added flags and pennants of every size and shape, embroidered with dragons, tigers, bears and leopards, and decorated with golden standards, white tassels, crimson fringes and black covers. On all sides of the mountain broad glacis were constructed. On the western and southern roads two taverns were rebuilt, both to receive visiting gallants and to listen for and quickly report the approach of government troops. Zhang Qing and his wife Sun the Witch, who originally had been innkeepers, were given charge of the tavern on the west. The south side tavern remained under Sun Xin and his wife Mistress Gu. Zhu Gui and Yue Ho continued to run the tavern on the east side, and LiLi and Shi Qian the one on the north. More barricades were set up in each of the three passes, and chieftains assigned to their defense. All were abjured to perform strictly their defined duties.

One day the Tattooed Monk spoke to Song Jiang. “I have a friend, a pupil of Li Chong, called Nine Dragons Shi Jin,” he said. “He's now on Mount Shaohua in Huayin County in the prefecture of Huazhou. With him, joined in brotherhood are Zhu Wu the Miraculous Strategist, Chen Da the Gorge-Leaping Tiger, and Yang Chun the White-Spotted Snake. I think of Shi Jin often. He saved my life in the Waguan Monastery, and I won't forget it. I'd like to go and see him, and bring him and the other three back to join us. How does that idea strike you?”

“I've heard of Shi Jin's fame. It would be fine if you could bring him here. But don't go alone. Take Wu Song. He's a pilgrim monk. He'll be an appropriate companion.”

Wu Song expressed his willingness to go. Sagacious collected his luggage and put on his slanting hat and waist bag, as suited a meditation monk. Wu dressed as a pilgrim. The two bid farewell to the chieftains, left the mountain and crossed the Shore of Golden Sands. Starting early and resting late, they travelled many a day until they came to the border of Huayin County in the prefecture of Huazhou. They headed directly for Mount Shaohua.

Song Jiang was worried about them after they left. He directed Dai Zong the Marvellous Traveller to follow and keep an eye on them.

Sagacious Lu and Wu Song reached the foot of Mount Shaohua. Brigands in ambush stepped out and barred the road. “Where are you monks from?” they demanded.

“Is there an Excellency Shi Jin on this mountain?” countered Wu Song.

“You're asking for Chieftain Shi? Wait here a while. I'll report your arrival to our leaders and they'll come down and greet you.”

“Just say Sagacious Lu is here.”

The brigand wasn't gone long. He returned with Zhu Wu the Miraculous Strategist, Chen Da the Gorge-Leaping Tiger and Yang Chun the White-

Spotted Snake, who welcomed the two callers. But Shi Jin was not among them.

“Where is His Excellency?” queried Sagacious. “Why isn't he here?”

Zhu Wu stepped forward. “Aren't you Major Lu Da from the district of Yanan?”

“I am. And this pilgrim is the Constable Wu Song who slew the tiger on Jingyang Ridge.”

The three chieftains hastily bowed. “We've long known the fame of you both! We heard that you'd set up a stronghold on Two-Dragon Mountain. What brings you here today?”

“We're not there any longer,” said Sagacious. “We've joined Song Jiang in the big fortress on Mount Liangshan. Today we've travelled specially to see Excellency Shi.”

“Please come to our stronghold on the mountain, then,” said Zhu Wu, “and I'll tell you all about him.”

“If you've got anything to say, say it! Waiting is too much of a friggin nuisance!”

“The reverend is an impatient man,” Wu Song explained. “Why not tell him now?”

“After Excellency Shi joined us three on this mountain, we prospered,” said Zhu Wu. “Recently, he went down and met an artist, a man named Wang Yi, from the Northern Capital in Taming Prefect. Wang had been painting some murals he had promised the Emperor of Golden Heaven Temple on Mount Huashan in the Western Range. He'd gone there with his daughter Jade Branch. Ho, the prefect of Huazhou—a crooked grafter who harms the people, one of Premier Cai's clique—went to the temple one day to burn incense and was struck by the girl's beauty. He sent emissaries several times to ask for Jade Branch as his concubine. Wang Yi wouldn't agree, so he took her by force and ordered the father exiled to a distant military region.

Wang Yi, while passing through here on the way to exile, met Shi Jin and told him the story.

“His Excellency rescued him and brought him up the mountain, killing his two escorts. Then he went to the prefectural office to destroy Ho. But he was discovered, seized, and thrown into prison. The prefect is also mustering a force to wipe us out. We've nowhere to go and no way to cope. Our situation is bitter!”

“That prick has no manners! How dare he act so tough!” cried Sagacious. “I'll finish him off for you!”

“Please come to our stronghold for a conference,” said Zhu Wu.

Sagacious was unwilling, but Wu Song pointed and said: “Can't you see the sun is already settling on the treetops?”

The Tattooed Monk roared impatiently and blew out a gusty breath. Reluctantly he went with the others to the Mount Shaohua fort. The five sat down together. Wang Yi was introduced to Sagacious and Wu Song.

He told how Prefect Ho extorted decent people's money and seized their daughters. The three chieftains had cows and horses slaughtered and entertained the two visitors at a feast.

Sagacious refused to drink. He said: “Brother Shi isn't here, so I won't touch a drop. All I want is a good night's sleep. Tomorrow I'll go into town and kill that oaf!”

“Don't stir up any trouble, brother,” Wu Song urged. “You and I can hurry back to Mount Liangshan and report. We'll request Song Jiang to lead a large force against Huazhou. In that way we'll rescue Excellency Shi Jin.”

“By the time we get men from the fortress brother Shi Jin's life will have vanished!”

“Will you save him by killing Ho?” Wu Song was strongly opposed to the monk's going.

“Calm yourself, Reverend,” said Zhu Wu placatingly. “Constable Wu Song is right.”

“It's calm people like you who are going to be the death of brother Shi,” cried Sagacious. “His life is in that fellow's hands and you sit here drinking and piddling over details!”

They finally persuaded him to drink a cup or two of wine. Lu went to bed with his clothes on. He rose at the fourth watch the next day, took his Buddhist staff and knife and set out swiftly for Huazhou.

“He wouldn't listen to me,” said Wu Song. “He's sure to get into a jam!”

Zhu Wu instructed two discreet brigands to follow and keep track of the impetuous monk.

Sagacious rushed directly into town and asked where he could find the prefectural office.

“Across that bridge and to the east,” he was told.

He had just reached the pontoon bridge when someone advised him: “Get out of the way, monk. His Excellency the prefect is coming!”

“I was looking for him, and here he drops right into my hands,” Sagacious said to himself. “That lout is a dead man!”

The prefect's escort of honor passed in pairs. His enclosed sedan-chair was guarded on either side by ten captains carrying whips and spears and iron chains.

“It won't be easy to get at the wretch,” thought Sagacious. “And if I try and fail, I'll be a laughing stock!”

The prefect looked through the window of his sedan-chair and saw Sagacious, who was obviously hesitating whether to approach him. Ho crossed the bridge and at the prefectural office got out of his chair and summoned two of his captains.

“Invite that big fat monk on the bridge to come to my residence for a vegetarian meal.”

The captains went to the bridge and said to Sagacious: “The prefect invites you to a meatless repast.”

“The knave is sure to die by my hand,” thought Sagacious. “I wanted to strike him, but because I was afraid I couldn't get at him I let him pass. I'm still after him, and now he invites me!” He followed the captains to the prefectural compound.

Ho had already left instructions. When Sagacious arrived at the front of the hall he was told to leave his staff and knife and go to a rear building for his vegetarian meal. Sagacious demurred. Everyone berated him.

“For a monk you don't know very much! How can you carry weapons deep into the prefectural compound?”

Sagacious thought: “With my two fists alone I can crush that oaf's skull!” He left his staff and knife on the porch and followed the captains inside.

Prefect Ho was seated in a rear building. He shouted: “Seize that bald robber!”

Thirty or forty policemen poured out of closets on both sides and pounced on Sagacious. Even if he were Prince Nezha how could he avoid Earth's net and Heaven's snare? Indra himself couldn't escape from such a dragon's lair and tiger's den!

Truly, the moth destroys itself in the flame, the angry turtle must die when it swallows the baited hook.

How did Sagacious Lu save himself from the clutches of Prefect Ho? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 59
Wu Yong by a Ruse Obtains the Golden Hanging Bell
Song Jiang Fights on Mount Huashan in the West

The policemen rushed Sagacious Lu to the foot of the prefect's platform.

“Where are you from, bald donkey?” shouted Ho.

“What crime have I committed?”

“Who sent you here to kill me? The truth, now!”

“I'm a monk, a man who's renounced the world. How can you ask me that?”

“I saw you waiting to attack my sedan-chair with your staff, but you didn't dare. Bald donkey, you'd better confess!”

“This bucko didn't try to kill you. Why have you arrested me? You're wronging a peaceful man.”

“Since when does a monk call himself 'this bucko'? He's a plundering bandit from the fifth region West of the Pass, for sure, who's come to avenge Shi Jin! If we don't beat him, he won't admit it. Guards, give this bald donkey a good drubbing!”

“Don't you put a finger on me! Let me tell you something!” yelled Sagacious. “I'm Sagacious Lu the Tattooed Monk from Liangshan Marsh! It doesn't matter if you kill me! When my brother Song Jiang finds out and comes down from the mountain, you might just as well cut off your own donkey head and send it to him!”

Prefect Ho was furious. He had Sagacious Lu severely beaten, then ordered his underlings to fasten a big rack around the monk's neck and throw him into the jail for the condemned. At the same time he sent off a dispatch to the central authorities, requesting instructions. Lu's Buddhist staff and knife were locked away for safe-keeping.

This matter was soon the talk of the entire prefecture. Lesser brigands got wind of it and hastened up Mount Shaohua to report. Wu Song was shocked. “Two of us were sent to attend to something and one has already been captured,” he thought. “How can I go back and face the chieftains?”

While he was pondering another bandit arrived from the foot of the mountain and announced: “A chieftain dispatched from Mount Liangshan. He's called Dai Zong the Marvellous Traveller, and he's waiting below.”

Wu Song hastily went down, brought him up, and introduced him to Zhu Wu. They told Dai how Lu had refused to take advice and had fallen into a trap. Dai was startled.

“I can't stay here long,” he exclaimed. “I must return to Mount Liangshan and let our brothers know, so that they can send forces to save him.”

“I'll be waiting anxiously,” said Wu Song. “I hope our brothers will hurry to the rescue.”

Dai Zong ate a vegetable meal, then worked his magic travel formula and sped towards Liangshan Marsh. He reached the stronghold in three days. He related to Chao Gai and Song Jiang how Sagacious Lu had wanted to kill Prefect Ho in order to save Shi Jin, but had been snared himself, instead. Song Jiang was alarmed.

“Two of our brothers in difficulty,” he said. “Of course we'll rescue them. We mustn't delay. We'll muster men and horses immediately and set out in three contingents.”

In the van of the first unit were Hua Rong, Qin Ming, Lin Chong, Yang Zhi and Huyan Zhuo. They commanded a thousand armored cavalry and two thousand infantry and took the lead, pushing through mountains and spanning rivers.

The middle unit was headed by Song Jiang, with Wu Yong, Zhu Tong, Xu Ning, Xie Zhen and Xie Bao as his lieutenants. They led a mixed force of infantry and cavalry numbering two thousand.

Bringing up the rear with fodder and grain were Li Ying, Yang Xiong, Shi Xiu, Li Jun and Zhang Shun, leading also two thousand infantry and cavalry men. This brought the expedition to a total of seven thousand. They left the mountain fortress, a turbulent stream of spears and halberds, men and horses, moving like the wind, and headed for Huazhou.

After several days on the road, they passed the halfway point, and Dai Zong was sent to announce their coining to the stronghold on Mount Shaohua. Zhu Wu and the other two leaders prepared animals for slaughter and fine wines in anticipation of their guests.

Song Jiang and his three contingents then arrived at the foot of the mountain. Wu Song went down with Zhu Wu, Chen Da and Yang Chun to greet Song Jiang, Wu Yong and the other leaders and invite them to the stronghold. When all were seated Song Jiang asked about the situation in the town.

“Prefect Ho has imprisoned your two chieftains. He's only waiting for word from the imperial court before disposing of them,” said Zhu Wu.

“What should our rescue plan be?” queried Song and Wu.

“It's a big town with a deep broad moat. A very difficult place to attack,” said Zhu Wu. “Only by striking from within and without at the same time can you capture it.”

“Tomorrow we'll go to the outskirts and take a look,” said Wu Yong, “then we'll discuss our plan.”

Song Jiang drank for some time. He longed for dawn so that he could start reconnoitering.

“They've got two of our big chieftains in their prison. They're sure to be prepared,” said Wu Yong. “We can't go during daylight. But there will be a bright moon tonight. Let's start down late in the afternoon. At the first watch, we can reconnoiter.”

When the sun was well past its meridian, Song Jiang, Wu Yong, Hua Rong, Qin Ming and Zhu Tong rode down the slope and advanced along a winding road. At the first watch they neared the town of Huazhou. They dismounted and observed it from a bluff.

It was the middle of the second lunar month. The moonlight was bright as day. There Wasn't a cloud in the sky. They could see several gates in the

strong high wall enclosing the town. The moat was deep and wide. For a long time they stared, noting also Mount Huashan, west in the distance. Truly a formidable well-guarded town! What was to be done? None of them could think of a plan.

“Let's return to the stronghold,” said Wu Yong, “and talk there.” The five rode back through the night to Mount Shaohua. Song Jiang was frowning. His face wore a troubled expression.

“We'll send a dozen or so clever young men down to keep an ear cocked for what's going on,” Wu Yong decided.

Before three days had passed, one of the scouts returned and reported: “The emperor has dispatched a Marshal of the Council of Imperial Defense, bearing a set of imperial golden hanging bells, to bum incense on Mount Huashan. He's come from the Yellow River to the Weihe.”

“Brother, our worries are over,” Wu Yong told Song Jiang. “Our plan is here.” To Li Jun and Zhang Shun he said: “I want you to do this and this...”

“The problem is we don't know the terrain,” said Li Jun. “It would be best if we had someone to lead the way.”

“How about me?” Yang Chun the White-Spotted Snake proposed.

Song Jiang was very pleased, and the three went down the mountain.

The following day, at Wu Yong's suggestion, Song Jiang, Li Ying, Zhu Tong, Huyan Zhuo, Hua Rong, Qin Ming, and Xu Ning followed quietly with five hundred men to a fording point on the Weihe River. There, Li Jun and Zhang Shun were waiting with more than ten large boats. Wu Yong told Hua Rong, Qin Ming, Xu Ning and Huyan Zhuo to lie in ambush upon the bank; Song Jiang, Wu Yong, Zhu Tong and Li Ying boarded the vessels; Li Jun, Zhang Shun and Yang Chun then concealed the boats along the shore. The party waited there through the night.

At daybreak, they heard the distant sound of gongs and drums, and three government craft hove into view. On a yellow banner was inscribed the

words: *Marshal Su Who Burns Incense on Mount Huashan by Imperial Decree.*

On Song Jiang's boat, Zhu Tong and Li Ying, each holding a long spear, stood behind him. Wu Yong was on the prow. They blocked the government vessel with their own when it reached the cove. A captain wearing a purple robe and silver girdle emerged from the cabin with twenty men.

“What boat are you?” he shouted. “How dare you interfere with the passage of a high minister?”

Song Jiang, hands clasped before him, bowed and hailed the officer respectfully. Wu Yong, from the prow; replied.

“Song Jiang, a champion of the righteous, from Liangshan Marsh, awaits your gracious orders.”

A chamberlain who was on board came forward and said: “A marshal of the imperial court is on his way to Mount Huashan to burn incense on orders of the emperor. Why do you robbers interfere?”

Song Jiang continued bowing.

“We are champions of the righteous,” replied Wu Yong. “We want only to see the marshal's honored visage so that we may offer him our plea.”

“Who do you think you are, requesting to see the marshal!” cried the chamberlain. And two captains who stood on either side barked: “Keep your voices down!”

Song Jiang still did not stir from his position.

“We are inviting the marshal to come ashore. We have something to discuss with him,” said Wu Yong.

“You're mad!” exclaimed the chamberlain. “The marshal is an imperial official. How can he talk with the likes of you!”

“If the marshal is unwilling to meet us I'm afraid our boys may give him a shock,” Song Jiang said, standing erect.

Zhu Tong waved the pennant that was attached to his spear, and Hua Rong, Qin Ming, Xu Ning and Huyan Zhuo suddenly emerged with their men from their places of concealment. Setting arrows to their bow-strings, they took up positions on the bank by the ford. The terrified boatmen plunged into the interiors of the government vessels.

Alarmed, the chamberlain hurried in to report. Marshal Su had no choice but to emerge and take a seat on the prow. Again Song Jiang bowed and hailed him respectfully.

“Why do you halt my boat?” the marshal demanded.

“We would not presume to behave improperly.”

“Then why, sir champion, do you block our passage?”

“We wouldn't dare. We want only to beseech the marshal to come ashore. There is a matter we wish to discuss.”

“I am under imperial orders to burn incense on Mount Huashan, champion. How can I confer with you? A minister of the imperial court is not so lightly to be called ashore!”

“If Marshal Su refuses,” said Wu Yong from the prow, “I'm afraid our followers will be equally unyielding.”

Li Ying waved his pennanted spear and Li Jun, Zhang Shun and Yang Chun came rowing up in a boat. While the startled Marshal Su watched, Li and Zhang, sharp gleaming knives in their hands, leaped onto the government vessel, and knocked two of the captains into the water.

“Stop that nonsense,” Song Jiang shouted. “You're startling His Excellency!”

Li and Zhang promptly dived into the river and heaved the two captains back. Both Li and Zhang were as at home in the water as they were on dry

land. Now they bounded smoothly onto the deck.

The marshal's soul seemed to have left his body. Again Song Jiang yelled at his men.

“You boys get out of here! Stop frightening the marshal! I'll persuade him to come ashore myself.”

“If you have anything on your mind, champion, why not tell me about it here?” said Su.

“This is not the place to talk. Please come to our mountain stronghold. We have no wish to harm you. May the Spirit of Mount Huashan destroy me if I'm lying!”

Marshal Su no longer had any choice. He disembarked. He was given a horse, helped to mount, and led off by the outlaws.

Song Jiang and Wu Yong instructed Hua Rong and Qin Ming to accompany Su up the mountain. He himself swung into the saddle and followed, after ordering that the marshal's retinue plus the incense, sacrificial items and golden hanging bells all be brought along. He left only Li Jun, Zhang Shun and a hundred men to guard the boats. All the other chieftains returned to the stronghold.

There, Song Jiang dismounted and escorted Su into a large hall. He seated the marshal in the middle. The chieftains stood in lines on either side. Song Jiang kowtowed four times. He remained kneeling before Su.

“Originally I was a small functionary in Yuncheng County,” he said. “A judicial proceeding compelled me to become an outlaw and take refuge in Liangshan Marsh. I am waiting for an imperial amnesty so that I may devote my services to our country.

“Two of my brothers, though blameless, have been framed by Prefect Ho and thrown into jail. We wish to borrow the imperial incense and accoutrements, plus the golden hanging bells, as a means of getting into

Huazhou. When we've finished we'll return them. It will have nothing to do with you, Marshal. We pray that you consent."

"If you take the imperial incense and things and the matter becomes known, I will be implicated."

"Just blame everything on me when you get back to the capital, Marshal."

Su realized that men like these couldn't be refused. He therefore agreed. Song Jiang respectfully toasted him and laid a feast in thanks. He put the clothes of the entourage on his own men. From among the outlaws he selected a handsome, clean-shaven fellow and dressed him in the garments of the marshal, as an impersonation of Su Yuanjing. Song Jiang and Wu Yong were made up as chamberlains; Xie Zhen, Xie Bao, Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu as captains. Outlaws in purple robes and silver girdles carried pennants, banners, ceremonial equipment and symbols of office, and bore reverently the imperial incense, the sacrificial objects and the hanging golden bells. Hua Rong, Xu Ning, Zhu Tong and Li Ying dressed as guards. Zhu Wu, Chen Da and Yang Chun provided quarters for the marshal and his entourage, and wined and dined them.

Qin Ming and Huyan Zhuo were given command of one contingent of men and horses, and Lin Chong and Yang Zhi another, and were directed to advance in two columns towards the town. Wu Song was dispatched to the gate of the Mount Huashan Temple to wait for the trumpet's call, and then go into action. Dai Zong was sent on ahead to announce the coming of the "imperial mission."

To make a long story short, the procession left the mountain stronghold, descended to the fording point, got into the boats and embarked. Instead of calling on the prefect in Huazhou it went directly towards Mount Huashan Temple. Dai Zong announced its imminent arrival to the abbot of the Yuntai Monastery and the deacon of the temple. The clerics hurried to the shore to give welcome with flowers, candles and lanterns, banners and precious panoplies. The imperial incense was placed in a miniature pavilion, which the monks respectfully carried into the temple, along with the hanging golden bells.

The abbot approached the “marshal,” and Wu Yong said: “He's been ill all through the journey. Get him a sedan-chair.”

Attendants helped the “marshal” into the conveyance and he was carried to the temple's Hall for Officials and invited to rest. “Chamberlain” Wu Yong addressed himself to the abbot.

“The marshal is here under the emperor's decree with imperial incense and golden hanging bells to offer homage to the god. Why hasn't the local prefect appeared to welcome him?”

“We've already dispatched a messenger. I'm sure he'll be here shortly,” replied the abbot.

Before the words were out of his mouth, the public prosecutor of the prefecture and sixty or so constables came as an advance party with wine and fruits to call on the “marshal.” The outlaw who was disguised as this official, although resembling him somewhat, was unable to imitate his speech. Therefore he pretended to be ill and sat on a divan wrapped in a quilt. The public prosecutor, seeing the pennants, banners and serrated flags, all obviously imperial equipage from the Eastern Capital, was completely convinced of his authenticity.

The “chamberlain” went in twice, ostensibly to confer, then led the public prosecutor inside, where he knelt at the edge of the dais, a good distance from the “marshal,” and kowtowed. The “marshal” pointed and mumbled something. Wu Yong led the public prosecutor forward, meanwhile berating him.

“The marshal is an important minister, very close to the emperor. He's come a long distance to this place under imperial decree to burn incense, and was ill on the road. Why didn't your prefectural officials go well forward to meet him?”

“We received notification that he was coming, but we had no idea he was so near. That's why we failed to greet him and he reached the temple ahead of us. The prefect was intending to come, but bandits on Mount Shaohua have joined forces with the outlaws in Liangshan Marsh to attack the town. We're

on constant alert, and he doesn't dare leave. He sent me on ahead with wine of greeting. He'll be following soon to pay his respects."

"The marshal refuses to drink a drop until your prefect arrives and welcomes him with proper ceremony," announced Wu Yong.

The public prosecutor called for wine and drank with the "chamberlain" and the "retinue." Wu Yong again went inside and returned with a key. He led the prosecutor to see the pair of golden hanging bells. He opened the lock and, from their scented bag, removed the bells, showed them to the prosecutor, and suspended them from a bamboo frame. They were of matchless workmanship, having been made by the most skilful craftsmen in the imperial palace. Encrusted with pearls and precious jewels and with a red silk lantern suspended between them, they had hung in the center of the palace's Hall of the God. Only the special craftsmen of the imperial court could have created them.

After permitting the prosecutor to view the bells, Wu Yong returned them to their container and locked it. He then produced many documents from the Council of Administration and handed these to the prosecutor. He also requested the "marshal" to choose an auspicious day for conducting the sacrifice.

The prosecutor and his constables examined the documents, bid farewell to the "chamberlain," and returned to Huazhou to report to the prefect. Song Jiang thought with satisfaction: "Although that rogue of a prosecutor is crafty, we've got him completely buffaloed!"

By then Wu Song had taken up his position outside the temple gate. Wu Yong directed Shi Xiu to conceal a knife on his person and join him there. He also told Dai Zong to disguise himself as a captain.

The abbot of the Yuntai Monastery served a vegetarian meal, and ordered the overseer to have the temple tidied up. As Song Jiang strolled around the grounds he thought it a splendid place. The buildings were unusually fine. Huashan Temple was truly like heaven on earth.

Song Jiang then returned to the Hall for Officials. A gate-keeper reported: “Prefect Ho has arrived.” Song summoned Hua Rong, Xu Ning, Zhu Tong and Li Ying—the four “guards,” each bearing arms—and stationed them on either side. He positioned Xie Zhen, Xie Bao, Yang Xiong and Dai Zong—all with concealed weapons—to the left and right.

The prefect, who had come with more than three hundred men, dismounted before the temple and swarmed in with his party. “Chamberlains” Wu Yong and Song Jiang observed that all were armed with swords.

Wu Yong immediately shouted: “A marshal of the imperial court is within. Trivial persons keep back!”

The crowd halted, and only Prefect Ho advanced. “Chamberlain” Wu Yong said: “The marshal invites the prefect to enter.” Prefect Ho walked into the Hall for Officials and kowtowed before the “marshal.”

“Prefect,” said Wu Yong, “do you acknowledge your misfeasance?”

“I didn't know the marshal had arrived. I beg forgiveness.”

“The marshal has come to Mount Huashan in obedience to the emperor's decree to burn incense. Why didn't you go well forward to welcome him?”

“We didn't know his arrival was imminent, and so were remiss in our duty.”

“Seize him!” Wu Yong shouted.

Xie Zhen and Xie Bao had already pulled out their daggers. With one kick they knocked Ho to the ground, then cut off his head.

“Into action, brothers!” shouted Song Jiang.

The prefect's three hundred followers were paralyzed with fright. Hua Rong and the others closed in and swept them down like abacus beads. Half of them scrambled to the temple gate. But there Wu Song and Shi Xiu, brandishing their knives, waded in while outlaws bent on slaughter attacked from all sides. Not a single man of the three hundred got away. Some came later to the temple, and these too were killed by Zhang Shun and Li Jun.

Song Jiang ordered that the imperial incense and the golden hanging bells be packed up, and all quickly boarded the vessels. Even before they reached Huazhou they saw two columns of smoke rising. They surged into the town and first freed Shi Jin and Sagacious Lu from the prison. Next, they broke open the storehouses, took everything of value, and loaded it on carts. Sagacious rushed to the rear hall and got back his knife and staff. Jade Branch had long since jumped into a well and committed suicide.

Leaving Huazhou, they got into the boats and returned to Mount Shaohua, where they restored to Marshal Su the imperial incense, the golden hanging bells, the pennants, banners and symbols of office, and respectfully expressed their thanks. Song Jiang presented him with gold and silver on a platter. All of his retinue were similarly rewarded, regardless of rank.

A farewell banquet was given for them in the stronghold and gratitude to the marshal was again expressed. The chieftains escorted them down the mountain to their boats at the river ford. Every vessel and every single possession were returned to their owners. Once more Song Jiang thanked Marshal Su.

Song returned to Mount Shaohua and conferred with the four gallant leaders. They removed all money and grain from the fortress and set it to the torch. Then the outlaws, with horses, grain and fodder, set out together for Liangshan Marsh.

As to Marshal Su, after embarking he sailed to Huazhou. There he learned that the Mount Liangshan brigands had slaughtered soldiers, plundered the storehouses of money and grain, killed over a hundred army officers, stole all of the horses, and annihilated hundreds in the Huashan Temple.

Su instructed the public prosecutor to send a written report to the Council of Administration for transmission to the emperor stating that “Song Jiang robbed the imperial incense and hanging bells en route, and was thereby able to lure the prefect to the temple and murder him.”

The marshal burned the imperial incense at the Huashan Temple and entrusted the golden bells to the abbot of the Yuntai Monastery. He then hastened back to the capital, travelling day and night, and reported to the emperor what had transpired.

Song Jiang, after rescuing Shi Jin and Sagacious Lu, again divided his forces into three contingents and, accompanied by the four gallant fellows from Mount Shaohua, returned to Liangshan Marsh. They harmed no one in any of the prefectures and counties through which they travelled.

Dai Zong was sent on ahead to the fortress to report their coming. Chao Gai and the other chieftains descended the mountain to welcome them. Together they went up and entered Fraternity Hall. When greetings had been exchanged, all joined in a feast of celebration. The following day Shi Jin, Zhu Wu, Chen Da and Yang Chun, at their own expense, gave a banquet in thanks to Chao, Song, and the other leaders. Several more days passed.

To skip the minor details, one day Dry-Land Crocodile Zhu Gui suddenly arrived and reported: “On Mount Mangdang in Peixian County, Xuzhou Prefecture, there is a newly formed band of robbers, about three thousand in number. Their leader is a Taoist named Fan Rui. His nickname is Demon King Who Roils the World. He can summon the wind and rain, and he's a fantastic military tactician. He has two lieutenants: One is called Xiang Chong. His nickname is Eight-Armed Nezha. He carries a round shield pierced by twenty-four throwing knives. He can hit a man at a hundred paces and never miss. In his hand is an iron javelin. The other is called Li Gun. His nickname is the Flying Divinity and he also carries a round shield. Only his is pierced by twenty-four darts. These too are infallibly deadly at a hundred paces. He holds also a precious sword.

“These three sworn brothers occupy Mount Mangdang, and they rob and pillage. Now they have decided to come and swallow our fortress. I heard about this and had to report.”

Song Jiang was furious. “How dare those crooks behave so rudely,” he fumed. “I'll go down and deal with them!”

Nine Dragons Shi Jin stepped forward. “My three brothers and I have just come to the stronghold and haven't yet made the slightest contribution. We'd like to lead our own men and seize those robbers.”

Song Jiang was delighted. Shi Jin mustered his contingents. Then he, Zhu Wu, Chen Da and Yang Chun donned their armor, bid farewell to Song Jiang and went down the mountain. They crossed the water in boats from the Shore of Golden Sands and hurried along the road directly towards Mount Mangdang. In three days they came within sight of it. Here it was in ancient times that the first Han emperor Gao Zu killed the snake.

The three units proceeded to the foot of the mountain. Hidden robber scouts had already gone up to report.

Shi Jin deployed his forces from Mount Shaohua in battle formation. Guarded completely in armor, astride a steed as red as a glowing coal, he rode at the head of his men, a three pointed two-edged blade in his hand.

The three leaders behind him were Zhu Wu, Chen Da and Yang Chun. Zhu Wu wielded two double-edged swords as he rode forward.

Reining in their steeds in front of their position, the four watched for some time. They saw a swarm of men come racing down the slope, preceded by two bold stalwarts. The first was Xiang Chong, of Peixian County, Xuzhou Prefecture. He carried a round shield in which twenty-four throwing knives were inserted. In his right hand he held a javelin. Attached to his back was an identifying pennant reading: *Eight-Armed Nezha.*

The second brave fellow, from Peixian County, was Li Gun. He bore a round shield pierced by twenty-four darts. The shield was in his left hand. In his right he grasped a sword. Attached to his back was a pennant inscribed: *Flying Divinity.*

When Xiang Chong and Li Gun saw Shi Jin, Zhu Wu, Chen Da and Yang Chun, astride their horses before the opposite position, they said not a word. Instead, while lesser robbers beat gongs and cymbals, the two charged, brandishing their shields. Shi Jin's force couldn't withstand them. While the rear guard withdrew, Shi Jin's forward unit resisted, but Zhu Wu's middle

unit yelled and ran for their lives for twenty or thirty *li*. Shi Jin was nearly hit by a flying knife. Yang Chun dodged too slowly, and was wounded by one of them. His horse was injured, and he abandoned it and fled on foot.

Shi Jin counted his forces and found he had lost half. He conferred with Zhu Wu and the others. They were intending to send someone to Mount Liangshan for aid when a fighter came and reported: “There are some two thousand men and horses on that highway to the north where the dust is rising.” Shi Jin and the others mounted and looked. They saw the banners of Liangshan Marsh. Riding at the head of the contingent were Hua Rong and Xu Ning. Shi Jin hastened to greet them. He related how Xiang Chong and Li Gun had attacked with their whirling shields and how his forces had been unable to withstand them.

“Brother Song Jiang has been worried about you. He was sorry he let you go. He's sent us two to help,” said Hua Rong.

Shi Jin was very pleased. The two units combined and made camp.

At dawn the following day, as they were preparing to muster their men and go forth against the foe, a fighter arrived and reported: “More cavalry are approaching on the highway to the north.” Hua Rong, Xu Ning and Shi Jin rode out to meet them and saw an army of three thousand men led by Song Jiang personally.

Shi Jin told him how formidable Xiang Chong and Li Gun were with their flying knives, darts and whirling shields, and that he had lost half his men. Song Jiang was greatly alarmed.

“Let's make camp first,” Wu Yong suggested, “then we can talk this over.”

The impatient Song Jiang wanted to muster their forces and drive directly for the foot of the mountain. But it was already growing dark, and on Mount Mangdang blue lanterns were visible.

Gongsun Sheng said: “Those people must know magic. The blue lanterns in their camp show that someone there is able to cast spells. We'd better fall back. Tomorrow I'll use a counterspell and we'll catch a couple of them.”

Pleased, Song Jiang ordered his army to withdraw twenty *li* and make camp.

Early the next morning Gongsun worked his spell. And as a result, a demon king with clasped hands presented himself at Mount Liangshan, a miraculous general with full willingness surrendered in the Marsh.

What then was the spell Gongsun offered to Song Jiang? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 60
Gongsun Sheng Defeats the Demon King on Mount Mangdang
Chao the Heavenly King Is Hit by an Arrow in Zengtou Village

Gongsun told Song Jiang and Wu Yong his strategy.

“It's the same one used by Zhuge Liang when he positioned the boulders on the battlefield at the end of the Han Dynasty when the country split into three,” said the Taoist. “We'll arrange our army into four groups and eight sections of eight companies each, totalling sixty-four, with the commander-in-chief in the middle. It will thus have four heads and eight tails, and be able to turn in any direction like the wind and clouds above the earth, as quickly as any wild beast, bird or reptile. When the enemy come down from the mountain and attack, we'll open into two and let them come in deep. As soon as our forces see our seven-starred banner wave, let them surround the enemy like a long serpent. I have a magic formula that will drive those three robber leaders to the center. Back or forward, left or right, they won't be able to get out. We'll dig a concealed pit and drive them into it. On either side we'll have men hidden with hooked poles, ready to take them.”

Song Jiang was very pleased. He issued the appropriate orders, directing his officers to act accordingly. He deployed his positional forces under eight fierce commanders. These were: Huyan Zhuo, Zhu Tong, Hua Rong, Xu Ning, Mu Hong, Sun Li, Shi Jin and Huang Xin. He put Chai Jin, Lu Fang and Guo Sheng in charge of a central force. Song Jiang himself, plus Wu Yong and Gongsun, were in overall command, with Chen Da to transmit

their orders by flag signals. Zhu Wu was directed to take five men to a nearby height, and from there observe the battlefield and report developments.

By mid-morning the army had neared the mountain and was spreading out in battle formation, banners waving and drums pounding provocatively. On Mount Mangdang twenty or thirty gongs thunderously crashed, shaking the earth. The three robber leaders proceeded down the slope, spreading out their force of over three thousand men. Fan Rui, their bold chieftain, rode in the van, with Xiang Chong and Li Gun to his left and right.

At the edge of the battlefield he reined in his horse. Fan Rui could work magic, but he knew little of military tactics. He watched while Song Jiang divided his army into four groups and eight sections. “Go on, deploy them,” he said to himself with secret satisfaction. “That's exactly what I want you to do.”

He turned to Xiang Chong and Li Gun. “When you see the wind rising, take five hundred knife twirlers and pitch in.”

The two lieutenants, each grasping his shield, javelins and flying blades at the ready, waited for Fan Rui to start. His bronze comet hammer in his left hand, a two-edged sword in his right, the Demon King Who Roils the World muttered a few magic phrases, then shouted: “Speed!”

A wild gale rose on all sides, whipping up clouds of sand and stones that darkened the sky and obscured the sun. Shouting, Xiang Chong and Li Gun charged with their five hundred knife twirlers. Song Jiang's army separated into two, and the foe moved in. They were immediately beset by powerful bowmen from both sides. Only forty or fifty of the robber band were able to advance. The remainder withdrew to their original position.

Song Jiang, observing from high on a slope, saw that Xiang Chong and Li Gun were the midst of his forces. He directed Chen Da to wave the seven-starred banner. The outlaw army rolled and shifted into the form of a long snake.

Xiang Chong and Li Gun ran east and hurried west, turned left and wheeled right, but nowhere could they find an escape route. No matter in which direction they hastened, Zhu Wu pointed them out from his height with a small flag.

Gongsun also watched from a bluff. He unsheathed his ancient sword with its pine tree decorations, muttered an incantation, then shouted: “Speed!”

At once, a wind closely pursued Xiang Chong and Li Gun, whirling at their heels. The sky darkened, the sun lost its glow. They couldn't see a single man or horse. Everything was enveloped in a black fog. They completely lost sight of the men behind them. Panic-stricken, the two desperately sought a way back to their own forces, but in vain.

Suddenly there was a sound like a clap of thunder. The two cried out in consternation. Together they tripped and tumbled head over heels into a deep pit. From both sides men with long hooked poles hauled them out. They bound the captives with ropes and brought them to the mountain slope and requested rewards. Song Jiang pointed with his whip. His three contingents plunged into a murderous assault. Fan Rui's men fled towards Mount Mangdang. Many couldn't escape. More than half were killed.

Song Jiang recalled his troops. When he and his chieftains were seated outside his tent, fighters led in Xiang Chong and Li Gun, under guard, and delivered them beneath his standard. He quickly ordered that their bonds be removed, and he went forward personally, wine goblet in hand.

“Forgive me,” he said. “In the course of hostilities, we couldn't do anything else. I, the humble Song Jiang, have long known of the great fame of you three warriors. I was hoping to invite you to our mountain to join our righteous cause, but I never could find a suitable opportunity. If you won't consider it beneath you, return with us to our stronghold now. Nothing could give me greater happiness.”

The two fell to their knees and kowtowed. “We know the great name of the Timely Rain, as who doesn't?” they responded. “Unfortunately, we were never able to pay our respects before. We failed to recognize your vast integrity, and went against Heaven's will. Today you have captured us. No

death would be too heavy, yet you treat us so courteously. If you decide to spare our lives, we swear to serve you faithfully to the end of our days. As to Fan Rui, he can't get along without us two. If you, righteous leader, will let one of us go back, we'll try to talk him into joining you. Does that seem all right?”

“No need to keep one of you here as hostage. Both of you can return to your stronghold. I'll wait for your good news.”

“Truly a man of noble generosity! If Fan Rui doesn't agree, we'll seize him and present him beneath your standard.”

Song Jiang was very pleased. He invited them into his headquarters, wined and dined them, gave them fresh suits of clothing, and presented them with two fine horses. He directed a few of the outlaws to return their shields and weapons, escort them down the mountain, and see them off. The two were extremely grateful.

When they reached the foot of Mount Mangdang, members of their band were astonished to see them, and escorted them up to Fan Rui. He asked them what had happened.

“We've gone against Heaven's will and deserve to die,” they said.

“Why do you say that, brothers?” he demanded.

They told him how chivalrous Song Jiang had been.

“Since Song Jiang is so generous and gallant, we shouldn't go against the will of Heaven,” said Fan Rui. “Let's all join him.”

“We've come to propose that very thing.”

That night they set the affairs of the stronghold in order. The following morning, they presented themselves to Song Jiang and kowtowed before him. He raised them to their feet and invited them into his tent and seated them. Impressed by his manifestation of complete trust, they spoke frankly and at length about their various backgrounds.

The three invited the chieftains to their fortress on Mount Mangdang, where they slaughtered steers and horses and feasted Song Jiang and his lieutenants. They also rewarded the men of his three contingents. After the banquet Fan Rui pledged himself as a pupil to Gongsun Sheng. Song Jiang directed the Taoist to teach Fan Rui his Divine Method for Summoning the Five Thunderbolts, much to the latter's delight.

In the next few days, the livestock was led away, the stronghold's money and grain was packed, and belongings were laden on pack animals. Men and horses were assembled and the fortress was put to the torch. All then went with Song Jiang and his chieftains back to Liangshan Marsh. The journey was uneventful.

Dai Zong flew up the mountain to report their arrival. As they were about to ford the river at the edge of the marsh, a big fellow on the road near the reeds saw Song Jiang and kowtowed. Song hastily dismounted and raised the man to his feet.

“What is your name, sir, and where are you from?”

“My family name is Duan, my given name Jingzhu. Because of my red hair and yellow beard, I'm called the Golden Dog. My family are from Zhuozhou Prefecture, and I earn my living rustling horses in the north. This spring I stole a splendid animal north of the Spear Range. It's white as snow, without a single hair of a different color. From head to tail it's ten feet long, and stands eight feet high from hoofs to back. It can cover a thousand *li* in a day. It's famed throughout the north as the White Jade Lion That Glows in the Night. It belonged to a prince of the Tartars. When it was put out to graze at the foot of Spear Range, I nabbed it. In the gallant fraternity the Timely Rain is famous, but I never had a chance to meet you. I wanted to present you with the horse as a mark on my respect. But while passing through the village of Zengtou, southwest of the prefectural town of Lingzhou, it was seized from me by the fifth son of the Zeng family. I told him it belonged to Song Jiang of Liangshan Marsh, but the churl was very insulting, and I dared say no more. I got away as quickly as I could. I've come here specially to inform you.”

Song Jiang took a liking to the thin rough-looking fellow. In spite of his odd appearance, he was clearly not an ordinary person.

“Come with us to the stronghold,” he said. “We'll talk about it there.” He took Duan in his boat and they crossed to the Shore of Golden Sands.

Chao Gai, the Heavenly King, and the other chieftains, escorted the returning leaders to Fraternity Hall. Song Jiang introduced Fan Rui, Xiang Chong and Li Gun to the chieftains. Duan and the three greeted them with respect. Drums beat clamorously, and a feast was held in celebration.

More and more men were joining the mountain citadel. Bold fellows from all over came like the wind. And so Song Jiang instructed Li Yun and Tao Zongwang to supervise the building of new dwellings, and to construct additional forts on every side.

Duan spoke again of the merits of the horse. Song Jiang sent Dai Zong the Marvellous Traveller to the village of Zengtou to inquire about it. In four or five days Dai returned.

“Zengtou has something over three thousand families,” he told the chieftains. “One is known as the Zeng Family Establishment. It is headed by Zeng the Elder, who comes originally from the land of the Tartars. He has five sons, called the Five Tigers of the Zeng Family. Their names, in order of age, are: Tu, Mi, Suo, Kui and Sheng. Their instructor is Shi Wengong, and his assistant is Su Ding. The village is defended by six or seven thousand men and stockaded camps. They've built more than fifty cage carts, boasting there is no room on this earth for both us and them. They say they will capture all of our chieftains, that we are enemies.

“The thousand *li* horse known as the Jade Lion is ridden by the instructor Shi Wengong. Even more infuriating, the wretch has composed a rhyme which he's taught all the kids in the village. It goes like this:

When our horses' bridles jingle

God and demons with fear tingle.

Iron carts plus iron locks,

Prisoners nailed in iron stocks.

Liangshan Marsh we'll cleanly flush,

Chao Gai to the capital we'll rush,

And capture Timely Rain—that's Song,

And his war mentor Wu Yong.

Five Zeng tigers boldly stand,

Famed far and wide throughout the land.

Chao Gai was enraged. “How dare those animals be so unmannerly!” he fumed. “I'm going down there personally. If I don't capture those rogues I won't return!”

“You're the leader of our fortress, brother,” said Song Jiang. “You mustn't lightly take action. Let me go.”

“It's not that I want to steal your thunder,” said Chao Gai, “but you've gone many times. You must be weary from combat. This time I'm going. Next time, brother, it will be your turn.”

Song Jiang pleaded in vain. The furious Chao Gai selected five thousand men and twenty chieftains and set forth. The remainder stayed with Song Jiang to guard the stronghold. Chao divided his forces into three brigades and went down the mountain, ready to march on Zengtou Village.

Song Jiang, Wu Yong and Gongsun saw them to the Shore of Golden Sands. While they were drinking a sudden wind snapped the pole supporting Chao Gai's standard. Everyone blanched.

“An evil omen,” said Wu Yong. “Choose another day for your expedition, brother.”

“The wind snaps your standard, brother, just as you're about to set forth. It's not auspicious for military action,” said Song Jiang. “Wait a bit longer and then deal with those knaves. There'll still be time.”

“The movement of wind and clouds is nothing to be alarmed about,” retorted Chao Gai. “Now is the time, in the warmth of spring. If we wait until they build up their strength and then attack, it will be too late. Don't try to stop me. I'm going, come what may!”

Song Jiang couldn't dissuade him. With his troops, Chao Gai ferried across the river. Sunk in gloom, Song returned to the fortress. He sent Dai Zong down to watch developments and report.

Chao Gai with his five thousand men and twenty chieftains neared the village of Zengtou. Confronting them was stockaded camp. The following morning Chao went with the chieftains for a closer look. Clearly, the village was strongly fortified.

Suddenly, from a grove of willows seven or eight hundred men emerged. At their head was a bold fellow—Kui, fourth son of the Zeng family.

“You bandits from Liangshan Marsh are all rebels,” he shouted. “I've been meaning to turn you over to the authorities and claim the reward, and now Heaven sends you right into my arms! Get off your horses and be bound. What are you waiting for!”

Chao Gai was very angry. As he turned his head he saw one of the chieftains riding forth to do battle with Kui. It was Lin Chong, the first to form the chivalrous band on Mount Liangshan.

The two horses met, and the warriors fought more than twenty rounds, with neither vanquishing the other. Kui realized he was no match for Lin Chong. He wheeled his mount and lance in hand, rode for the willow grove. Lin Chong reined in his steed and did not pursue. Chao Gai led his forces back to camp. There, they discussed strategy for attacking the village.

“Let's go tomorrow and provoke a battle,” Lin Chong proposed.

“We'll see what their strength actually is, then we can talk some more.”

The next morning they marched with five thousand men to the broad plain outside the entrance to Zengtou, took up positions, beat their drums and shouted. Cannon thundered from the village and a large body of men rode forth, led by seven bold fellows in a single line. In the middle was the instructor Shi Wengong. To his left was his assistant Su Ding; to his right the eldest son, Tu. Continuing to the left were Mi and Kui; further right were Sheng and Suo. All were clad in armor from head to foot. An arrow fitted to his bow, Shi sat the thousand-Zi Jade Lion horse. He held also a crescent-bladed halberd.

After three rolls of the drums, several cage carts were pushed out from the Zeng family position and placed to the fore. Tu pointed at his adversaries.

“Rebellious bandits,” he shouted, “do you see these carts? If we simply kill you, we won't be real men. We're going to nab every one of you, lock you in the carts and deliver you to the Eastern Capital, just to show you how tough we Five Tigers really are! Surrender now, while you still have the chance, then we'll see!”

Chao Gai, enraged, levelled his lance and galloped towards Tu. To protect him, the other chieftains also charged, and the two sides were soon locked in combat. The Zeng family forces retreated step by step into the village. Lin Chong and Huyan Zhuo slew mightily to east and west, providing close cover for Chao Gai. But Lin could see that the prospects were poor. He hastily pulled back and reassembled his men. Both sides were strewn with casualties. Chao Gai returned to camp very depressed.

“Don't take it to heart, brother,” the chieftains urged. “Worry will only injure your health. Brother Song Jiang also has setbacks at times in battle, but he wins in the end. The fighting was confused today. Both sides suffered casualties. But we haven't lost. No need to feel bad!”

Chao Gai said: “I'm not in a good mood, that's all.” He remained in camp for three days. Though each day his troops went to challenge the foe, not a

man came forth from Zengtou.

On the fourth day, two monks called on Chao Gai. They were escorted by several of the brigand soldiers. Chao received them outside his tent. The two dropped to their knees and kowtowed.

“We are custodians of the Fahua Monastery east of Zengtou,” they said. “Those Five Tiger sons constantly harass our monastery, demanding gold and silver and money. There's nothing they won't do. We know their layout in detail, and we've come to show you how to get inside and take their fortifications. If you can eliminate them it will be a blessing.”

Chao Gai was very pleased. He invited the monks to be seated, and had them served wine.

“Don't believe them, brother,” Lin Chong advised. “How do you know it isn't a trick?”

“We are men who have renounced the material world. We wouldn't dare to deceive,” protested the monks. “We've long known of the righteous behavior of the men of Liangshan Marsh. You never harm the common people wherever you go. We've come to join you. Why should we want to fool you chieftains? Besides, the Zeng family forces could hardly defeat your great army. Why be suspicious?”

“You needn't doubt them, brother,” said Chao Gai. “We'll miss a big opportunity. I'll go myself, tonight, to see.”

“Please don't, brother,” Lin Chong urged. “Let me raid the village with half our men. You wait outside with reinforcements.”

“If I don't go personally, would our forces be willing to attack? You remain with half our troops as reinforcements.”

“Who will you take with you?”

“Ten chieftains and twenty-five hundred men.”

That evening a meal was prepared and eaten. The bells were removed from the horses' bridles, the men wore stick gags, for a swift night march. Silently, they followed the two monks to the Fahua Monastery. It was very ancient. Chao Gai dismounted and went inside. There was no one around.

“Why are there no monks in a monastery of this size?” he queried.

“Those animals of the Zeng family caused so much trouble that most of them were compelled to return to secular life. Only the abbot and a few retainers remain. They're living in the courtyard where the tower is. Stay here temporarily. A little later, we'll lead you into the stockade of those rogues.”

“Where is it?”

“There are four stockades. The Zeng brothers are in the northern one. If you take that, the others won't matter. The remaining three will quit.”

“When shall we go?”

“It's now the second watch. We'll go at the third, and take them by surprise.”

From Zengtou, they heard the measured beat of the watchman's drum. Later, they heard the drum sounding the half-watch. After that, they listened no more.

“The soldiers are all asleep,” said the two monks. “We can go now.”

They led the way. Chao Gai and the chieftains mounted and, with their men, left the monastery and followed. Before they had gone five *li*, the two monks had disappeared into the shadows.

The van was afraid to continue. The paths on all sides were tortuous and difficult. No homes or people could be seen. The forward troops became alarmed and informed Chao Gai.

Huyan Zhuo ordered a retreat. They had marched less than a hundred paces when on every side gongs crashed and drums pounded. Resounding yells

shook the ground. Torches everywhere sprang to light.

Chao Gai and the chieftains hurriedly led their men in a withdrawal. They had just traversed two turns in the road when they ran into a troop of enemy cavalry, who showered them with arrows. One struck Chao Gai in the face, and he fell from his horse.

Huyan Zhuo and Yan Shun galloped off at top speed. Liu Tang and Bai Sheng behind them, put Chao back on his steed and fought their way out of the village. At the village entrance Lin Chong rushed up with reinforcements. Only then were they able to stem the foe. A wild melee continued until dawn, when both sides retired to their bases.

Lin Chong made a count of the troops. The three Ruan brothers, Song Wan and Du Qian had escaped by crossing the stream. Of the twenty-five hundred men who had gone in with Chao Gai only twelve or thirteen hundred were left. They had followed Ou Peng back to camp.

The chieftains came to see Chao Gai. An arrow was stuck in his cheek. They pulled it out. Blood flowed, and he fainted. On the arrow was the name of the instructor Shi Wengong. Lin Chong directed that a salve made for metal weapon wounds be applied. Chao Gai had been hit by a poisoned arrow. The venom was working, and he was unable to speak.

Lin Chong ordered that he be placed on a cart, and that the three Ruan brothers, plus Du Qian and Song Wan, escort him back to the mountain fortress. The fifteen chieftains remaining in the camp conferred.

“Who would have thought when brother Chao Gai the Heavenly King came down the mountain that such a thing would happen,” they said. “The wind snapped the pole of his standard, and this was the fulfillment of that bad omen. We'll simply have to return to the stronghold. Zengtou Village can't be taken in a hurry.”

“We'd better wait for orders from brother Song Jiang before pulling our troops out,” Huyan Zhuo said.

The chieftains were morose, the men had no heart for battle. All wanted to go back to the fortress. That night at the fifth watch, as the earliest faint light began to appear, the fifteen chieftains were still sunk in gloom. For indeed, a snake cannot travel without a head, a bird without wings cannot fly. The chieftains sighed. They had no assurance that either an advance or a retreat would succeed.

Suddenly, a picket guarding the road rushed in and reported: “Five enemy columns heading this way. Their torches are without number!”

Lin Chong immediately mounted. Torchlight had turned the hills on three sides as bright as day. Shouting foe were rapidly advancing. The chieftains did not resist. At Lin's orders, they broke camp and withdrew. The Zeng family forces pursued them fiercely. The two sides fought a running battle for sixty *li* before the brigands could break free. They counted their men. They had lost nearly seven hundred. It was a heavy defeat.

They hurriedly resumed the march in the direction of Liangshan Marsh. Halfway there, they were met by Dai Zong, who transmitted a command: They were to bring their troops back to the stronghold. There, new plans would be formulated.

The chieftains complied. On their arrival, they went to see Chao Gai. He was no longer able to eat or drink, and his whole body was swollen. Song Jiang wept by his bedside. He personally applied poultices and fed Chao medicines. The chieftains all kept vigil outside the tent. By the third watch of the third day a great weight seemed to be depressing Chao's body. He turned his head to Song Jiang.

“Preserve your health, brother,” he said. “Let whoever captures the bowman who slew me become the ruler of Liangshan Marsh.” Chao Gai closed his eyes and died.

To Song Jiang it was as if he had lost one of his parents. He cried until he was faint. The chieftains helped him out of the tent. They urged him to look after the stronghold's affairs.

“Don't grieve so, brother,” Wu Yong and Gongsun Sheng advised. “Life and death are man's destiny. Why take it so hard? There are important matters awaiting your attention.”

Song Jiang ceased his weeping. He directed that the body be leaved in fragrant water, dressed in burial garments and hat, and displayed in Fraternity Hall. The chieftains performed sacrificial ceremonies. A coffin and inner casket were built and, after an auspicious day was selected, placed in the main hall. A spirit curtain was hung and a memorial tablet put before it, in the center. The inscription read: *Memorial Tablet of the Venerable Chao the Heavenly King and Leader of Liangshan Marsh.*

All the chieftains, from Song Jiang on down, dressed in deep mourning. The junior officers and the rank and file wore mourning head kerchiefs of white. The fatal arrow, broken in a vow of vengeance, lay before the altar. A long white banner was raised. Monks were invited to the citadel from a nearby monastery to offer prayers for the departed. Every day Song Jiang led the outlaws in mourning. He had no heart to attend to the affairs of the fortress.

Lin Chong, with Gongsun Sheng and Wu Yong, discussed the matter with the other chieftains. They decided to make Song Jiang their leader and take their orders from him. The following morning, bearing flowers, lanterns and candles, Lin Chong and the others invited Song Jiang, the Defender of Chivalry, to be seated in the Hall of Fraternity.

“Hear us, brother,” said Wu Yong and Lin Chong. “A country cannot be governed without a sovereign, a household cannot be ruled without a master. Chao Gai, leader of our mountain stronghold, has gone to Heaven. There is no one to make decisions. Your name, brother, is world renowned. We wish to choose an auspicious day and invite you to become our leader. We will obey your commands.”

“Remember the dying wish of Chao the Heavenly King: 'Let whoever captures the bowman who slew me become the ruler of Liangshan Marsh,'“ said Song Jiang. “You all know about it, you mustn't forget. I haven't avenged him, or wiped out this debt. How can I accept?”

“That is what Chao said,” Wu Yong admitted. “But we still haven't caught the culprit, and the stronghold cannot be without a leader. If you don't take over, brother, who else would dare? Who will command our forces? His wish was as you say. Why don't you accept temporarily? We'll work something out later.”

“Putting it that way is reasonable. I'll accept the post for the time being. When Chao Gai is avenged, when someone captures Shi Wengong, no matter who, he must become our ruler.”

Li Kui the Black Whirlwind shouted: “Not only are you right for leadership of Liangshan Marsh, brother—you'd make a fine emperor of the Song Dynasty!”

“You're talking wildly again, you wretched oaf. Stop your raving or I'll cut your tongue out!”

“Why should you do that? I'm inviting you to become emperor, not the head of some little group worshipping a local god!”

Wu Yong intervened. “The scamp has no sense of proportion. Don't trouble yourself with the likes of him. Please deal with important affairs.”

Song Jiang burned incense and sat in the chair of the supreme leader. On his left was Wu Yong, on his right was Gongsun Sheng. The row to the left was headed by Lin Chong, Huyan Zhuo headed the row to the right. All paid their respects and took their seats. Song Jiang addressed them:

“I have accepted this post temporarily. I am completely reliant on your support, brothers. We must be of one heart and mind, united in our efforts, as close as bone and marrow, acting together to carry out Heaven's will. Today our fortress has many men. It's no longer like it was before. I'm asking you brothers to command six sets of fortifications. Fraternity Hall shall be known from now on as Loyalty Hall. We shall have four sets of land fortifications, front and back, left and right. On the rear of the mountain will be two small forts. On the front of the mountain will be three fortified passes. We'll also have a fort on the water at the foot of the

mountain, plus small fort on each of the banks. We shall ask you brothers to take charge.

“In Loyalty Hall I shall temporarily occupy the first position. Second shall be Military Advisor Wu Yong; third, Taoist Reverend Gongsun Sheng; fourth, Hua Rong; fifth, Qin Ming; sixth, Lu Fang; and seventh, Guo Sheng. The left set of fortifications shall be commanded by Lin Chong, Liu Tang, Shi Jin, Yang Xiong, Shi Xiu, Du Qian and Song Wan, in that order. The right by Huyan Zhuo, Zhu Tong, Dai Zong, Mu Hong, Li Kui, Ou Peng and Mu Chun. The front set of fortifications shall be under Li Ying, Xu Ning, Sagacious Lu, Wu Song, Yang Zhi, Ma Lin and Shi En. Guarding the rear will be Chai Jin, Sun Li, Huang Xin, Han Tao, Peng Qi, Deng Fei and Xue Yong. The water defenses will be under Li Jun, Ruan the Second, Ruan the Fifth, Ruan the Seventh, Zhang Heng, Zhang Shun, Tong Wei and Tong Meng. These forty-three chieftains shall be the leaders of the six inner defenses of the stronghold.

“The first pass at the front of the mountain shall be held by Lei Heng and Fan Rui, the second by Xie Zhen and Xie Bao, the third by Xiang Chong and Li Gun.

“The small fort on the Shore of Golden Sands shall be commanded by Yan Shun, Zheng Tianshou, Kong Ming and Kong Liang. Duck's Bill Shore's small fort shall be under Li Zhong, Zhou Tong, Zou Yuan and Zou Run.

“As to the two small forts on the rear of the mountain, the one on the left shall be led by Stumpy Wang, Ten Feet of Steel and Cao Zheng; the one on the right by Zhu Wu, Chen Da and Yang Chun.

“In Loyalty Hall in the row of rooms on the left Xiao Rang shall be in charge of documents; Pei Xuan, rewards and punishments; Jin Dajian, seals and letters; and Jiang Jing, money and grain accounts. In the row of rooms on the right, Ling Zhen shall be in charge of cannon; Meng Kang, shipbuilding; Hou Jian, clothing and armor manufacturing; and Tao Zongwang, walls and ramparts.

“In the rooms of the two wings behind the Hall, we'll have the following supervisors: Li Yun, housing; Tang Long, iron smithery; Zhu Fu, wines and

vinegars; Song Qing, feasts and banquets; Du Xing and Bai Sheng, miscellaneous.

“The four taverns which serve as lookout places for us shall continue to be run by Zhu Gui, Yue Ho, Shi Qian, LiLi, Sun Xin, Mistress Gu, Zhang Qing and Sun the Witch. Yang Lin, Shi Yong and Duan Jingzhu shall buy horses from the north.

“These are our dispositions. Let everyone respect them and none disobey.”

From the day Song Jiang assumed the leadership of the stronghold in Liangshan Marsh, every chieftain, large and small, was happy and content. All gladly acceded to his directions.

One day Song Jiang conferred with them. He wanted to avenge Chao Gai and lead troops against the village of Zengtou. But Wu Yong was opposed.

“The mourning customs of the people must be respected, brother,” he advised. “You must wait a hundred days before going into battle. It won't be too late.”

Song Jiang heeded his words and remained in the stronghold. Every day he had prayers offered for Chao Gai's safe passage into Heaven.

One day he invited a monk whose Buddhist name was the Beatified and who was a member of the Longhua Monastery in Darning the Northern Capital. The Beatified, on his way to Jining, had been passing through Liangshan Marsh, and had been asked to the fortress to conduct services for the departed. During a vegetarian meal, Song Jiang, in the course of conversation, inquired whether the Northern Capital had any places or people of note.

“Surely you've heard of the Jade Unicorn of Hebei?” the monk retorted.

Song Jiang and Wu Yong suddenly remembered. “We're not yet old. We shouldn't be so forgetful at our age,” Song exclaimed. “There's a rich man in the Northern Capital called Lu Junyi. His nickname is the Jade Unicorn. He's one of the Three Remarkable Men of Hebei Province. He lives in the

capital city and is highly skilled in the martial arts. With cudgel and staff he has no equal. If we could get him to join our stronghold, we'd need have no fear of any government troops or police sent to catch us."

Wu Yong laughed. "Why so despondent, brother? You want him up here? There's nothing hard about that!"

"He's the head of one of the leading families of Darning. How can we induce him to become an outlaw?"

"I've been thinking of this for some time, though for the moment I'd forgotten. I have a plan that will bring him up the mountain."

"You're not known as the Wizard without cause. Will you tell us, please, Military Advisor, what your plan is?"

Calmly, with two fingers pressed together, Wu Yong related his plan. And as a result, Lu Junyi cast aside embroidered banners and beaded drapes and entered instead the dragon's pool and tiger's den. Truly, to bring one man into the Marsh, warfare was inflicted on the entire population.

How did Wu Yong trick Lu Junyi into coming up the mountain? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 61
Wu Yong Cleverly Tricks the Jade Unicorn
Zhang Shun at Night Roils Golden Sands Crossing

"With the aid of this facile three-inch tongue of mine, I shall go fearlessly to the Northern Capital and persuade Lu Junyi to come to our mountain," Wu Yong avowed. "It will be as easy as taking something out of a bag. You just put your hand in and you've got it. All I need is a rough courageous companion to go with me."

Before he had finished speaking, Li Kui the Black Whirlwind shouted: "Take me, brother Military Advisor."

“Desist, brother,” Song Jiang cried. “If someone was needed for arson or murder, pillaging homes or raiding towns, you would be just right. This is a careful delicate operation. You're much too violent.”

“You all scorn me because I'm ugly. That's why you won't let me go.”

“It's not that. Darning is full of police. If anyone should recognize you, you'd be finished.”

“That doesn't matter. No one is better suited for what the Military Advisor wants.”

Wu Yong intervened. “I'll take you if you'll promise me three things. If you don't, you'll just have to stay here in the stronghold.”

“I'll promise you not three, but thirty!”

“First, you're like wildfire when you're drunk. From today on, you've got to quit drinking. You can begin again when we get back. Second, you'll go as a Taoist acolyte serving me. When I tell you to do something, you do it. Third,—and this is the most difficult— starting tomorrow you're not to say another word, you're to become a mute. If you promise these three things, I'll take you along.”

“I can promise not to drink, and to act like an acolyte. But if I can't talk, I'll stifle!”

“If you open your mouth you'll get us into a muddle.”

“Of course, it's easy. I'll keep a copper coin in my mouth. That'll do it.”

The chieftains laughed. Who could persuade Li Kui to remain behind?

That day a farewell feast was given in Loyalty Hall. In the evening, all retired. Early the next morning Wu Yong gathered a bundle of luggage and directed Li Kui, disguised as an acolyte, to tote it down the mountain on a carrying-pole. Song Jiang and the other chieftains saw them as far as the Shore of Golden Sands. They urged Wu Yong to be careful, and to keep Li

Kui out of scrapes. Wu Yong and Li Kui took their leave. The others returned to the stronghold.

The two travelled four or five days, stopping at inns in the evening and rising at daybreak, when they cooked breakfast and continued their journey. Li Kui was a constant irritation to Wu Yong. After several days, they arrived at an inn on the outskirts of the city. They spent the night there, and when Li Kui went down to the kitchen to cook their evening meal he hit the waiter so hard the fellow coughed blood.

The waiter went to their room and complained to Wu Yong. “That mute acolyte of yours is too rough, I was just a little slow in lighting the stove and he gave such a punch I spit blood!”

Wu Yong apologized and handed the man a dozen strings of cash for his pains. He berated Li Kui. Of that we'll say no more. They rose the next morning at dawn, cooked breakfast and ate. Wu Yong summoned Li Kui to the room.

“You pleaded to be taken along, and all you do is aggravate me. We're going into the city today. It's no place for fooling around. I don't want you to cost me my life!”

“I wouldn't dare!”

“Now remember this signal. If I shake my head, you're not to move.”

Li Kui promised. The two left the inn and set out for the city in disguise. Wu Yong wore a black crinkled silk head kerchief that came down to his eyebrows, a black Taoist cassock trimmed in white, and a multicolored girdle. His feet were shod in square-toed cloth shoes, and he carried a pole with a bronze bell which shone like gold. Li Kui's bristly brown hair was wound up into two coils on either side of his head. His black tiger body was clad in a short brown gown. A multicolored short-fringed sash bound his bear-like waist. He wore a pair of open-work boots for climbing mountains. On a pole with a curved end a strip of paper dangled, reading: “Fortunes told. One ounce of silver.” At that time robbers marauded throughout the land, and every prefecture and county had to be defended by troops. Since

the Northern Capital was the leading city in Hebei, it was garrisoned by an army under the personal command of Governor Liang. It was a neatly laid out metropolis.

Wu Yong and Li Kui swaggered up to the gate. The forty or fifty soldiers on guard were gathered around an officer seated in a chair. Wu Yong approached and bowed.

“Where are you from, scholar?” one of the soldiers asked.

“My name is Zhang Yong. This is Li, my acolyte. I'm a wandering caster of horoscopes. I've come to this great city to tell fortunes.” Wu Yong produced his false license and showed it to the soldier. “That acolyte has wicked eyes,” some of the other soldiers said. “Shifty, like a thief.”

Li Kui, who overheard, was ready to burst into action. Wu Yong hastily shook his head, and Li Kui lowered his gaze.

“It's a long story,” Wu Yong said apologetically. “He's a deaf mute, but he's terribly strong. He's the son of one our family's bondmaids. I had to take him along. He has no manners at all. Please forgive him.”

Wu Yong strolled on through the gate, with Li Kui plodding at his heels. They walked towards the center of the city. Wu Yong rang his bell and chanted:

Gan Luo won fame early, Zi Ya late,

Peng Zu and Yan Hui, each a different life span,

Fan Dan was poor, Shi Chong rich,

Fortune varies for every man.

“Fortune, destiny, fate. I predict life, I foretell death, I know who shall rise high and who shall fall low,” cried Wu Yong. “I'll tell your future for one ounce of silver.” Once more he vigorously rang his bell.

Fifty or sixty laughing children trailed behind. Singing and giggling, they passed the gate of Magnate Lu's storehouse. Soon Wu Yong returned and marched by again, followed by the hooting youngsters.

Lu was seated in the office, watching his stewards check merchandise in and out. Hearing the noise, he asked the man in charge for the day: “What's all that racket outside?”

“It's really very funny,” the man replied. “Some Taoist fortune teller from out of town is walking the streets offering his services. But he wants an ounce of silver. Who would give that much! With him is an acolyte, a sloppy looking fellow who walks like nothing human. Kids are following them and laughing.”

“He wouldn't venture to make such large claims if he wasn't a man of learning. Invite him in.”

The steward went out. “Sir priest,” he called. “The magnate asks you in.”

“Who is he?”

“The magnate Lu Junyi.”

Wu Yong told Li Kui to come along, raised the door curtain, and entered the office. He instructed Li Kui to sit down on a goose-necked chair and wait. Then he approached Lu and bowed.

Lu bowed in return. “Where are you from, sir priest? What is your name?”

“My name is Zhang Yong. I call myself the Mouth That Talks of Heaven. I'm from Shandong, originally. I can cast horoscopes for emperors, I can predict births and deaths, high position or poverty. For an ounce of silver I can tell your fortune.”

Lu invited Wu Yong to a small alcove in the rear of the hall. They seated themselves as host and guest. After tea was served, Lu ordered the steward to bring an ounce of silver.

“Please, sir priest, tell me my humble fate.”

“When were you born?”

“A gentleman asks only about misfortune, not fortune. So you needn't talk of prosperity. Just tell me what else is in store,” said Lu. “I'm thirty-two.” He stated the year, month, day and hour of his birth.

Wu Yong took out an iron abacus, calculated a moment, then slammed it down. “Fantastic!” he exclaimed.

Startled, Lu demanded: “What lies ahead for me?”

“I'll tell you frankly, if you won't take it amiss.”

“Point out the road to the lost traveller, sir priest. Speak freely.”

“Within the next hundred days, bloody tragedy will strike. Your family wealth will be lost, and you will die at the sword.”

Lu Junyi laughed. “You're wrong, sir priest. I was born in the Northern Capital and grew up in a wealthy family. No male ancestor ever broke the law, no female widow ever remarried. I conduct my affairs with decorum, I do nothing unreasonable, I take no tainted money. How can I have incurred a bloody fate?”

Wu Yong's face hardened. He returned the silver piece, rose, and walked towards the door. “People always prefer to hear what pleases them,” he sighed. “Forget it. I'm willing to point out a smooth road, but you take my good words as evil. I'll leave you now.”

“Don't be angry, sir priest. I was only joking. I'd like to hear your instructions.”

“If I speak directly, don't hold it against me.”

“I'm listening carefully. Hold nothing back.”

“Your fortune has always been good, magnate. But your horoscope conflicts with this year's fate god, and the result is evil. Within a hundred days, your head shall be separated from your body. This has been destined. There is no escape.”

“Isn't there any way to avoid it?”

Wu Yong again calculated on the abacus. He said: “Only if you go to a place one thousand *li* southeast of here. Although you may suffer some shocks and alarms, you will not be injured.”

“If you can arrange that, I'll gladly reward you!”

“I'll tell you a four line prediction verse. You must write it on the wall. When it comes true, you'll appreciate my mystic powers.”

Lu called for a brush pen and ink slab. Wu Yong sang these four lines and Lu wrote them on the white calcimined wall:

A boat sails through the reeds,

At dusk a hero wanders by,

Righteous to the very end,

Out of trouble you must fly.

Wu Yong collected his abacus, bowed and turned to go. Lu Junyi urged him to stay, at least until the afternoon.

“Thank you for kindness,” said Wu Yong, “but I must get on with my fortune telling. I'll come and pay my respects another day.”

Lu saw him to the gate. Li Kui took up the pole with the curved end and went out. Wu Yong bid Lu farewell. Followed by Li Kui, he departed from the city and returned to the inn. There he paid their bill and collected his luggage. Li Kui carried the fortune telling sign.

“The main job has been done,” Wu Yong exulted, after they had left the inn. “Now we must hurry back to the stronghold and prepare our welcome for Lu Junyi. Sooner or later, he'll come.”

To return to Lu Junyi, every evening at dusk he stood in front of his hall and gazed unhappily at the sky, sometimes muttering unintelligibly to himself. One day he impatiently summoned his stewards. Before long, they all arrived.

The chief steward was named Li Gu. Originally from the Eastern Capital, he had come to join a friend living in Darning. But the man was nowhere to be found and, after a time, Li Gu fell, frozen, outside the magnate's gate. Lu Junyi saved his life and took him into the household. Because Li Gu was diligent, could write and calculate, Lu put him in charge of household affairs. Within five years he rose to the post of chief steward. He managed all matters of both household and outside business, and had forty or fifty clerks working under him.

These now followed Li Gu into the hall and respectfully greeted the magnate. Lu looked them over and asked: “Where is that man of mine?”

The words were scarcely out of his mouth, when a person came before him. Over six feet tall, he was twenty-four or five years of age, was adorned with a thin mustache and goatee, and had a slim waist and broad shoulders. The kerchief on his head was twisted into the shape of a papaya, with his hair coming up through a hole in the middle. His white gown had a round silk collar of filagreed silver thread. Around his waist was a girdle woven of fine spotted red thread. His feet were shod in brown oiled leather boots. A pair of gold rings shaped like animals dangled from the back of his head. His neckerchief was of fragrant silk. A fan inscribed by a famous

calligrapher was tucked slantwise at his waist. Over one ear hung an all-season flower.

The young man was a native of the Northern Capital. After losing his parents as a child, he had been adopted by the Lu family. Because he had pure white skin, Lu engaged a skilled tattooist to decorate his body. The result was kingfisher blue added to white jade. No one could match the young man in beauty of physique. Not only was he gorgeously tattooed, but he could blow and strum musical instruments, sing and dance, and play word games. There was nothing he didn't know, nothing he couldn't do.

He could speak various dialects, knew the special jargon of many different trades. As for the fighting arts, no one could touch him. Hunting in the outskirts of the city, he could bring down any game with his bow. He used only three short arrows, and never missed. Wherever his arrow struck, there his quarry fell. Returning to the city in the evening, he seldom brought back less than a hundred birds. In archery contests, he cleaned up all the prizes.

His mind, too, was quick and agile. You had only to mention a problem and he gave you the answer. His name was Yan Qing. People of the Northern Capital were fond of quips, and they called him the Prodigy. He was Lu Junyi's most trusted adviser.

The men Lu summoned greeted him respectfully and stood in two lines. Li Gu headed the line on the left, Yan Qing headed the line on the right. Lu the Magnate addressed them.

“Last night a fortune teller predicted that unless I took refuge a thousand *li* southeast of here, I would suffer a bloody disaster within a hundred days. I remember now that southeast of here in Tai'an Prefecture, there's a temple on Mount Taishan called the Golden Temple of the Match-Heaven God. This god governs births and deaths and man's disasters. I shall go there and burn incense to expiate my sins and avoid the calamity. At the same time I can do a bit of business and admire the scenery. Li Gu, I want you to get me ten large carts and load them with our Shandong local products. Pack your luggage, because you're going with me. Yan Qing, you stay and look after the household and our storehouses. Li Gu will turn over his duties to you. I'm leaving in three days.”

“Master, you're making a mistake,” said Li Gu. “Everybody knows fortune tellers are slick talkers. You shouldn't listen to that fellow's claptrap. Remain at home. What's there to be afraid of?”

“My fate has been determined. Don't try to stop me. Once disaster strikes, it's too late to be sorry.”

“Please listen to my humble opinion, master,” said Yan Qing. “The road to Tai'an runs pass Liangshan Marsh, which is infested with bandits under Song Jiang. Though they rob and pillage, government soldiers and police can't get near them. Wait until times are more settled, if you want to burn incense. Don't believe that fortune teller's wild story. He's probably a plant from Mount Liangshan, sent to stir you up so that they can trick you into joining them. It's too bad I wasn't home last night. With two or three phrases I could have exposed the fellow and made him a laughing stock.”

“You're both talking rot. Who would dare to deceive me! Those oafs in Liangshan Marsh—what do they matter? I can scatter them like grass, in fact I'll go and nab them. My prowess with weapons will show them what a real man is like!”

Before he had finished speaking, a woman emerged from behind a screen. It was his wife Jia.

“Husband,” she said, “I've been listening to what you've been saying. 'Better to stay at home than even one *li* roam,' as the old saw goes. Ignore that fortune teller. Why put your vast family affairs aside and expose yourself to shocks and alarms in a den of tigers and lair of dragons just to do some business? Stay at home, be calm and content, relax quietly, and naturally nothing will go wrong.”

“You don't know anything about it, woman! My mind is made up. I don't want to hear any more from any of you!”

Yan Qing said: “Basking in the reflection of your good fortune, master, I have been able to learn a little skill with weapons. I don't mean to boast, but if you take me with you and any bandits happen along, I should be able to

knock off forty or fifty. Leave Chief Steward Li to look after things at home and let me accompany you."

"Li Gu knows trade practices I don't understand. He'll save me a lot of trouble. That's why I'm taking him and leaving you here. I have others to keep the accounts. All you have to do is take charge of the manor."

"My feet have been bothering me quite a lot lately," said Li Gu. "It's hard for me to walk any distance."

Lu was very angry. "Soldiers are trained for months for the sake of a few days of battle. I want you to go with me on this trip, and you've got all kinds of excuses. The next man who defies me is going to get a taste of my fists!"

Li Gu, frightened, looked towards the mistress. But she only walked sadly into an inner room. Yan Qing was even less inclined to speak.

Silently swallowing his humiliation, Li Gu went to pack the luggage. He got ten drivers, ten large carts, and forty or fifty animals to haul them. He loaded on the luggage, and had the merchandise securely tied in place.

Lu Junyi put his own affairs in order. The third day, he burned paper prayers, dispersed money to the male and female members of his family, and gave instructions to each. That evening he directed Li Gu to finish up quickly and prepare to leave the city first with two servants. Li Gu went off. The magnate's wife, seeing the carts, wept.

At the fifth watch the following morning, Lu rose, washed, and put on a complete set of new clothes. He gathered his weapons and went to the rear hall, where he burned incense in farewell to his ancestors. He instructed his wife: "Take good care of things at home. At the latest I'll be back in three months; at the earliest, only forty or fifty days."

"Be careful on the road, husband. Write to us when you can, so that we'll know how you're getting on."

Yan Qing came forward and bowed, in tears. Lu had orders for him as well.

“Be diligent in all things. Don't go running off to roister in houses of pleasure.”

“Since you'll be away, master, I certainly won't slacken.”

Staff in hand, Lu left the city. He was met by Li Gu.

“You and the two servants go on ahead,” Lu directed. “When you find a clean inn have them prepare food, so that it's ready for the drivers and porters when they get there, and we won't be delayed.”

Li Gu also carried a staff. He set off with the two servants. Lu and other servants followed with the carts. They passed splendid mountains and elegant waterways, travelling broad roads and level plains.

“I couldn't have enjoyed such scenery if I remained at home,” Lu thought pleasurably.

After travelling forty *li* or more he was met by Li Gu, and they had a pastry lunch. Li Gu went on again. Another forty or fifty *li* and they reached an inn, where Li Gu had arranged quarters for the night for all.

Lu went to his room, leaned his staff, hung up his felt hat, removed his knife, and changed his shoes and stockings. It goes without saying that he rested and dined. The company rose early the next morning and cooked breakfast. When everyone had eaten, the animals were hitched to the carts and the march resumed.

They proceeded in this manner for several days, stopping at dark and continuing at dawn. Again, they put up at an inn for the night. The following morning they were preparing to go on when one of the waiters addressed Lu Junyi.

“I must tell you, sir, that less than twenty *li* from here the road passes an entry to Liangshan Marsh. The lord of the mountain is Song Jiang. Although he doesn't harm travellers, rather than suffer frights and alarms it's best to go by quietly.”

“So that's how it is,” Lu exclaimed. He told a servant to fetch his trunk. Lu unlocked it and took out a bundle from which he extracted four white silk banners. He ordered the waiter to bring four bamboo poles and attach the banners, one to each. On them, Lu wrote this series of lines:

From the Northern Capital Lu the Bold

Transports merchandise a long, long way,

Determined is he to catch the robbers,

Fully his manliness to display.

Li Gu and the others groaned. “Are you a relative of Song the mountain lord, sir?” asked the waiter.

“I'm a magnate from the Northern Capital. What relation would I be to those crooks! I've come specially to nab that lout Song Jiang.”

“Speak softly, sir,” begged the waiter. “Don't get me involved. This is no joke. Even with ten thousand men, you'll never get near Song Jiang!”

“Bullshit. You oafs are probably all in cahoots with him!”

The waiter was beside himself with despair The drivers and porters were dumbfounded. Li Gu and the other servants knelt at the magnate's feet.

“Master, have pity on us. Save our lives, go back. Rather that than prayers for our departed souls!”

“What do you know!” Lu barked. “Would those little finches dare contend with an eagle? I've always wanted to show my prowess with arms, but I've never met a foe worthy. Today, I have my chance, here and now. Why wait! In those bags on my cart I've got some good hemp rope. The bandits I don't kill I'll knock down with my halberd. You tie them up and put them on the

carts. If necessary abandon the merchandise. We'll use the carts for transporting prisoners. I'll deliver their chief to the capital and claim the reward. That will satisfy my wish of a lifetime. If a single one of you refuses to go along with me now, I'll slaughter you right here!”

The four banners were affixed to the four leading carts. The remaining six carts followed. Li Gu and the rest, weeping and sniveling, had no choice but to obey the magnate. Lu took out a halberd head and tied it to his staff tightly with three strong knots. He hastened the carts forward in the direction of Liangshan Marsh. Li Gu trembled with every step he took on the winding mountain road, but Lu pushed on relentlessly.

They marched from early morning till almost noon. In the distance they saw a big forest, with trees larger than a two-man embrace. When they reached the edge of the forest a shrill whistle pierced the air, terrifying Li Gu and the two servants. They didn't know where to hide.

Lu Junyi ordered that the carts be pulled to one side, under guard. The drivers and porters, bemoaning their fate, crawled beneath the carts. “When I knock the robbers down, you tie them up,” Lu shouted. Before the words were out of his mouth, four or five hundred outlaws emerged from the edge of the forest. Behind them the crashing of gongs could be heard. Another four or five hundred brigands cut off Lu's retreat. Cannon boomed in the woods, and out leaped a bold warrior.

“Do you recognize the mute acolyte, Magnate Lu?” he called, brandishing a pair of axes.

Lu suddenly understood. “I've often thought of capturing you robbers,” he cried, “and I'm here today to do it. Bring that knave Song Jiang down the mountain to surrender. Any tricks and I'll kill you all. I won't spare a one!”

Li Kui laughed. “Magnate, you've fallen for a clever ruse by our Military Advisor. Come and take your place in a chieftain's chair.”

Enraged, Lu twisted his halberd and charged. Li Kui met him with axes swinging. Before they had fought three rounds Li Kui jumped from the combat circle, turned, and headed for the forest. Lu pursued, halberd level.

Li Kui ran into the wood, zigzagging left and right. In a towering fury, Lu plunged in after him. Li Kui flew into a grove of pines. By the time Lu got there, his adversary was gone.

He was turning away when a group of men appeared from the side of the grove and a voice called: “Don't go, Magnate. Do you know me?”

Lu looked and saw a big fat monk, dressed in a black cassock and carrying an iron Buddhist staff by its lower end.

“Who are you, monk?” the magnate shouted.

The man laughed. “I'm Sagacious Lu the Tattooed Monk. I'm here on orders from brother Song Jiang to welcome you and lead you up the mountain.”

“Bald donkey,” Lu exploded, “how dare you be so rude!” Twisting his halberd, he rushed the monk.

Sagacious met him with whirling staff. Before they had fought three rounds, the monk parried Lu's halberd, turned arid ran. Lu gave chase. At that moment Wu Song the Pilgrim stepped forth from among the brigands. He charged, brandishing two swords. Lu abandoned his pursuit of Sagacious and battled with Wu Song. They had fought less than three rounds when the Pilgrim hastened away.

Lu Junyi laughed. “I won't chase you. You louts aren't worth it!”

But then someone on the mountain slope called out: “You don't understand, Magnate. Haven't you heard that man fears falling into the water, just as iron fears falling into the fire? Our Military Advisor has made his plan. How can you escape?”

“Who are you, rogue?” Lu yelled.

The man laughed. “Liu Tang the Red-Haired Demon.”

“Petty crook, don't try to get away,” the magnate fumed. He dashed at Liu, halberd in hand.

They had just battled three rounds when a voice off at an angle shouted: “Gallant Mu Hong the Unrestrained is here!” And Liu Tatig and Mu Hong, each with a halberd, attacked Lu Junyi.

Before they had gone three rounds, Lu heard footsteps behind him. “At you!” he exclaimed. Liu Tang and Mu Hong fell back a few paces, and Lu whirled to face the adversary in his rear. It was Li Ying the Heaven-Soaring Eagle. From three sides Lu's foes assailed him. But he was completely unruffled, in fact the more he fought the stronger he became.

As they were belaboring each other, gongs crashed on the mountain top. The three chieftains feinted with their weapons and swiftly withdrew. Reeking of sweat from his exertions, Lu did not pursue. He returned to the edge of the forest to seek his carts and drivers. But the ten carts, their drivers and all the animals had vanished. Lu groaned.

He clambered to a high point and looked around. Far in the distance at the foot of a slope he saw a group of brigands driving the carts and animals before them. Li Gu and the others, tied in a line, followed. To the beat of drums and gongs, they were being led to a grove of pines.

Lu's heart burst into flames, rage engulfed him like smoke. Halberd in hand, he chased after the procession. When he was not far from the slope two bold fellows shouted at him: “Where do you think you're going?” One was Zhu Tong the Beautiful Beard, the other Lei Heng the Winged Tiger.

“Small-time robbers,” Lu yelled back. “Return my carts and drivers and animals!”

Zhu Tong twiddled his beard and laughed. “How can you be so dense, Magnate? Our Military Advisor often says: 'A star can only fly down, it can never fly back.' The way things stand, you might just as well come with us to the fortress and take your place in a chieftain's chair.”

Infuriated, Lu charged the two with levelled halberd. Zhu Tong and Lei Heng met him with their own weapons. Before they had fought three rounds the former constables turned and fled.

“I'll never get my carts back unless I knock one of those bandits over,” thought Lu. He pursued them recklessly around the bend of the slope. But the two had vanished. Instead, he heard the sound of clappers and flutes wafting down from the mountain top. He looked up. Fluttering in the breeze was an apricot yellow pennant on which was embroidered the words: *Righteous Deeds on Heaven's Behalf.* And there beyond, beneath a gold-spangled red silk umbrella, was Song Jiang, with Wu Yong to his left and Gongsun Sheng to his right. They were accompanied by a column of sixty or seventy men. All politely hailed Lu Junyi.

“Magnate, we trust you've been well!”

Lu grew very angry, and he cursed them by name. Wu Yong tried to soothe him.

“Calm yourself, brother. Song Jiang has long known of your virtue, and holds you in the greatest respect. He sent me to call at your gates and lure you up the mountain so that we might perform righteous deeds for Heaven together. Please don't take it amiss.”

“Presumptuous bandits,” yelled Lu. “How dare you trick me!”

From behind Song Jiang emerged Hua Rong with bow and arrow. “Magnate,” he called, “don't force a showdown between us. Let me demonstrate my archery.”

Before he had finished speaking, the arrow whizzed straight into the big red tassel atop Lu's broad-brimmed felt hat. Astonished, the magnate turned and fled. On the heights, drums shook the ground. From the east side of the mountain, led by Qin Ming the Thunderbolt and Panther Head Lin Chong, came a body of yelling mounted men, banners waving. A similar troop, also shouting and waving banners, charged out from the west side of the mountain, led by Two Rods Huyan Zhuo and Metal Lancer Xu Ning. Lu was so frightened he didn't know which way to go.

It was growing dark. Lu's feet hurt, and he was hungry. Frantically seeking an escape route, he hurried along a small mountain path. At dusk, mist veiled the distant waters, fog locked the deep mountains. The moon and

stars were dim, the vegetation a pale blur. Lu was reaching the ends of the earth, if not the limits of the sky.

He looked around. There was nothing but reeds here, and misty water. Lu raised his face to the sky and sighed. “I wouldn't listen to good advice, and now I'm in a terrible mess!”

A small boat slid out from among the reeds, sculled by a fisherman. “You're very brave, sir traveller,” the fisherman called. “This is the entry to Liangshan Marsh. What are you doing here in the middle of the night?”

“I've lost my way and can't find a place to spend the night. Save me!”

“This region is very broad, but there is a market town. It's over thirty *li* if you go by land, and the road is tortuous and difficult to follow. By water, though, it's only four or five *li*. Give me ten strings of cash and I'll take you there in my boat.”

“Get me to an inn in the market town and I'll give you plenty of silver.”

The fisherman rowed up to the shore and helped Lu on board, then shoved off with his iron-tipped bamboo pole. When they had gone four or five *li*, they heard the sound of an oar in the reeds ahead. A small craft flew out. On it were two men. The one in the prow, buff naked, gripped a long punting pole. The one in the stern was wielding a sweep oar. Pole held athwart, the man forward sang this song:

Though poems and books I cannot read,

And in Liangshan Marsh I dwell,

I shoot fierce tigers with snarebows and arrows,

Fresh baited hooks bring me fish as well.

Lu Junyi, startled, didn't dare utter a sound. From reeds on the right, two more men rowed out on another small boat. The man in the stern plied a creaking sweep oar. The man in the bow held horizontally a long punting pole. He sang this song:

My favorite pastime is killing men, A rogue I've been since the day I was born, Thousands in gold means nothing to me, I'm determined to nab the Jade Unicorn.

Lu the Magnate groaned. Now, from the middle reeds a third boat came skimming towards him. The man in the prow was holding an iron-tipped wooden pole upside down, and he was singing this song:

A boat sails through the reeds,

At dusk a hero wanders by,

Righteous to the end,

Out of trouble you must fly.

The men on all three craft hailed Lu respectfully. The one in the center was Ruan the Second. Ruan the Fifth was on the boat to the left, Ruan the Seventh was on the boat to the right. The three craft approached. Lu was very alarmed. He knew he couldn't swim.

“Land me on the nearest shore,” he urged the fisherman.

The man laughed. “By the blue sky above and the green waters below, I was born on the Xunyang River, came to Liangshan Marsh, and have never concealed my name. Meet Li Jun the Turbulent River Dragon! If you don't surrender, Magnate, you'll be throwing your life away!”

Lu was astonished. “It's either you or me!” he shouted, and he lunged at Li's heart with his halberd. Li saw the blade coming. Hands on the sweep oar, he

flipped over in a back somersault and landed kaplonk in the water. The boat spun around in a circle and the halberd fell overboard.

Suddenly, at the stern, a man shot up from under the water with a shout. It was White Streak in the Waves Zhang Shun. Treading water, he grasped the rudder and gave a quick twist. The boat turned turtle, and the hero landed in the drink. Could he live through this?

Truly, a plan had been laid to catch a phoenix and cage a dragon, a pit had been dug for a heaven-startling, earth-shaking man.

After falling in the water did Lu Junyi survive? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 62
Sniping with Arrows Yan Qing Saves His Master Leaping from a Building Shi Xiu Snatches a Victim from the Execution Grounds

Zhang Shun wrapped and arm around Lu's waist and swam with him towards shore. They soon reached the bank. Fifty or sixty men were waiting with lighted torches. These gathered round, removed Lu's dagger and stripped him of his wet clothes. They were about to bind his arms when Dai Zong the Marvellous Traveller transmitted an order.

“Lu the Magnate is not to be harmed,” he shouted.

An attendant gave Lu a silken embroidered tunic and gown to wear. Eight brigands brought a sedan-chair, assisted Lu into it, and set forth. Seen in the distance were twenty or thirty red silk lanterns, illuminating a mounted troop which was approaching to the accompaniment of drams and music. At the head was Song Jiang, Wu Yong and Gongsun Sheng. They were followed by many chieftains.

All dismounted. Lu Junyi hastily got down from his sedan-chair. Song Jiang knelt. The other chieftains, in rows, did the same. Lu also dropped to his knees.

“Since I have been captured, I request an early death.”

Song Jiang laughed. “Please sit in your sedan-chair, Magnate.”

The chieftains resumed their saddles. To the sound of music, the procession climbed through the three fortified passes and went directly to Loyalty Hall. There, the hosts dismounted and led Lu into the hall. It was brightly lit by lanterns and candles.

“Your fame, Magnate, has long thundered in my ears,” said Song Jiang. “Being able to meet you today is one of the greatest good fortunes of my life. My brothers behaved rudely a little while ago. We beg your forgiveness.”

Wu Yong stepped forward and said: “The other day, on orders from brother Song Jiang, I called at your gates disguised as a fortune teller. My aim was to lure you up the mountain so that you might join us in our mutual endeavors to act on Heaven's behalf.”

Song Jiang invited Lu Junyi to be seated in the highest chieftain's chair. Lu's reply was courteous.

“I've no talent, knowledge or ability, and I've offended your prestige. Ten thousand deaths would be a light retribution. Why do you make sport of me?”

Song Jiang smiled. “Who would dare? Because of our genuine respect for your great virtue, Magnate, we have hungered and thirsted for your arrival. We pray you do not scorn our humble mountain fortress. Be our leader. We will unquestioningly obey your every command.”

“Then let me die immediately, for I cannot accede to your wish.”

“Let's talk about it again another day,” Wu Yong suggested.

Wine was brought for the magnate. Lu had no way out, and he drank several cups. Lesser brigands conducted him to the rear hall to rest.

The next day sheep and horses were slaughtered and Song Jiang invited the magnate to a large feast. After much polite refusal, Lu consented to sit in the middle. When several rounds had been drunk, Song Jiang rose, goblet in hand.

“Last night we offended you, and for this we beg your pardon. Although our stronghold is small, and not a worthy place to water your horse, we hope you will consider our sincere fidelity. I gladly relinquish my position to you, Magnate. Please do not refuse.”

“You're making a mistake, sir chieftain. There are no crimes against my name, and my family has a bit of property. A man of the great Song Dynasty I was born, a ghost of the great Song Dynasty I will die. I prefer death to accepting your proposal!”

Wu Yong and the other chieftains also joined in Song Jiang's pleas. But Lu was determined not to become an outlaw.

“If you're not willing, Magnate,” Wu Yong finally said, “we can't force you. You would be with us in body but not in spirit. Since we have the rare privilege of having you here, even if you won't join us, at least stay a while. Then we'll escort you home.”

“Why not let me go right now? My family has had no news of me. I'm afraid they'll worry.”

“No problem about that. We'll have Li Gu return first with the carts. You can go a few days later.”

Lu turned to his chief steward. “Are your carts and merchandise all there?”

“Not a thing is missing.”

Song Jiang ordered that two large silver ingots be presented to Li Gu, and two small bits of silver be given to the servants, and ten ounces of silver be distributed among the carters. The recipients expressed their thanks.

“You know my difficulties,” Lu said to the chief steward. “When you get home, tell my wife not to worry. Say I'll be returning in four or five days.”

Li Gu, who wanted only to get away, readily assented. “I certainly will,” he promised. He bid farewell and left Loyalty Hall. Wu Yong rose.

“Set your mind at ease, Magnate,” he said. “Keep your seat while I see Li Gu off. I'll be back soon.”

Wu Yong mounted and went on ahead to the Shore of Golden Sands and there waited for the chief steward. Soon Li Gu, the two servants, the draught animals and their drivers, came down the mountain. Wu Yong, who had five hundred brigands with him, hemmed the procession in on two sides. Seated in the shade of a willow tree, he summoned Li Gu before him.

“Your master has already talked it over with us and agreed. Today he's taken the second chieftain's chair. Even before he came up the mountain, he

wrote a four line rebellious verse on the wall of a room in his house. Note the first word of each line. In the first it's 'Lu', in the second it's 'Jun', in the third it's 'Yi', in the fourth it's 'rebels'—'Lu Junyi rebels.' Now you know what he's doing in our fortress! At first we were going to kill you all, but then we thought it would give our stronghold a bad name. So we're letting you go. Travel day and night and hurry home. But don't nourish any hopes that your master will return."

Li Gu fervently kowtowed. Wu Yong ordered that boats take the men and animals across the river. They shortly were speeding along the road to the Northern Capital.

We'll leave Li Gu for the moment and talk of Wu Yong after he went back to the banquet in Loyalty Hall. He besieged Lu Junyi with clever and persuasive arguments. The feast didn't end till the second watch. Another feast was laid the following day.

"I appreciate the good intentions of you chieftains in keeping me here," said Lu, "but for me every day is like a year. I must leave today."

Song Jiang replied: "I'm a man of no talent, and have been very fortunate to meet you, Magnate. I'd like to use my own money to give you a small dinner where we can have a heart to heart chat. Please don't refuse."

Another day passed. The following day Song Jiang laid a feast, the next day it was Wu Yong, and the day after it was Gongsun Sheng. To tell it briefly, there were over thirty chieftains, and each day each of them in turn gave Lu a banquet. Time slipped away, the sun and moon shuttling across the sky. More than a month went by. Again Lu proposed to leave.

"We'd like to keep you," said Song Jiang, "but if you really must go, we'll have a few modest drinks in farewell in Loyalty Hall."

The next day, Song Jiang again paid for the feast out of his own pocket. The other chieftains protested to Lu Junyi.

"Though our brother respects you one hundred per cent, we respect you one hundred and twenty," they said. "But you go only to his banquet! Just

because you have regard for the substantial brick, that doesn't mean you should scorn the thin tiles!”

And Li Kui shouted: “I risked my life in the Northern Capital to invite you here, and you won't allow me to feast you. I'm going to hang on to your tail until you agree!”

Wu Yong laughed. “Who ever heard of that kind of an invitation? How crude! Magnate, forgive him. But, in view of their sincerity, you really ought to stay a little longer.”

Almost unnoticed, another four or five days expired. Lu was determined to go. Then Zhu Wu the Miraculous Strategist approached him with a group of chieftains in Loyalty Hall. “Although we are of lesser rank,” said Zhu, “we have expended some efforts for our brother Song Jiang. There isn't any poison in our wine! If you take offense and refuse to dine with us, I won't make any trouble. But I'm afraid my brothers will react badly. Then, being sorry will be too late!”

Wu Yong rose to his feet. “You men behave! I'll speak to the magnate for you. I'm sure he can stay on a bit longer. Why not? 'Advice offered, wine goblet in hand, is never ill-intentioned,' as the old saying goes.”

Lu could not withstand the importunities of so many. He agreed to remain another short while. This stretched into an additional nearly forty days. It had been the fifth lunar month when Lu left the Northern Capital, and by now he had spent more than two months in the mountain fortress. Golden wheat rustled in the breeze and the dew was cool. Autumn Festival time was rapidly approaching.

Lu longed to go home, and he spoke to Song Jiang about it. Obviously, his wish was intense.

“That's easy enough,” said Song. “Tomorrow, I'll see you to the Shore of Golden Sands.”

Lu Junyi was delighted. The next day, his clothing and weapons were restored, and a column of chieftains escorted him down the mountain. Song

Jiang presented him with gold and silver on a platter.

“I don't mean to boast,” said Lu, “but my family has money and goods in plenty. I'll take only enough to get me to the Northern Capital. I don't want the rest.”

Song Jiang and the other chieftains escorted Lu to the Shore of Golden Sands. There, they bade him farewell and returned to the stronghold. Of that we'll say no more.

We'll speak rather of Lu Junyi, who strode along at a rapid clip. In ten days he reached the suburbs of the Northern Capital. Since it was already dusk he didn't enter the city but put up for the night at an inn. Early the next morning he left the village hostel and hastened towards the city.

Before he had gone a *li* he met a fellow in tattered head kerchief and ragged clothes. The man, on seeing Lu, dropped to his knees and kowtowed. It was Yan Qing the Prodigy.

“What are you doing in this condition?” cried the magnate.

“This isn't the place to talk.”

The two rounded the corner of an earthen wall and Lu started to question Yan Qing.

“Not long after you left, master,” the young man related, “Li Gu returned and said to the mistress, 'The master has thrown in with Song Jiang in Liangshan Marsh. He's accepted the chair of the second chieftain.' Li Gu went to the authorities and accused you. They began living together and, claiming that I was disobedient, threw me out. They confiscated all my clothes and drove me from the city. And they warned all my friends and relations that they would go to court and prosecute anyone who gave me shelter, even if they had to spend half the family fortune doing it! As a result, no one dared have anything to do with me. Having no place to stay in the city, I've been wandering around in the outskirts, begging. I've had to

live in a rear lane. Take my advice, master, and return to Mount Liangshan. Don't even consider anything else. If you go into the city, you'll surely be trapped."

"My wife isn't that kind of a woman," Lu shouted. "You're just farting, you oaf!"

"You don't have eyes in the back of your head, master, how could you have seen? You spent most of your time developing your physique, you never had much interest in sex. The mistress has been having an affair with Li Gu for a long time. Now they can shut the door and be together as husband and wife. If you go home, master, they're bound to do you dirty."

Lu was furious. "My family has lived in the Northern Capital for five generations. Everyone knows us! How many heads has Li Gu got to spare that he would dare pull such a thing? You've probably been up to some wickedness yourself, and you're telling me this to put me off! I'm going home and get to the bottom of this, and then I'll settle with you!"

Yan Qing wept bitterly and kowtowed, clinging to his master's garments. Lu kicked him aside and strode on towards Darning.

He entered the city and went directly home. His stewards gaped in amazement. Li Gu hurried forward to welcome him. He escorted Lu into the hall, dropped before him and kowtowed.

"Is Yan Qing here?" Lu inquired.

"Don't ask, master. It's a long story and you've had a tiring journey. Why don't you rest first, then I'll tell you."

Lu's wife emerged, weeping, from behind a screen. "Don't cry," urged Lu. "Just tell me what's happened to young Yan."

"Don't ask now, husband. It's a long story and you've had a tiring journey. Why don't you rest first, then I'll tell you."

The magnate was growing suspicious, and he demanded an answer.

“Why not change your clothes, worship in the family chapel, and have some breakfast,” Li Gu suggested. “Then it will be time enough for us to speak.” He had food laid out for the magnate.

As Lu was raising his chopsticks, he heard shouts at the front and rear gates.

Two or three hundred policemen came charging in. They promptly bound the astonished Lu and drove him with blows of their batons to the residency of the governor of the Northern Capital.

Governor Liang was at that moment holding court. In lines to his left and right were seventy or eighty policemen like wolves and tigers, and these brought Lu before him. Lu's wife and Li Gu both knelt to one side.

“You were one of the Northern Capital's good citizens, you knave,” shouted the governor. “Why did you join the bandits in Liangshan Marsh and accept the second chieftain's chair? You came to link forces within and without so that they can attack the city! Now that you've been captured, what do you have to say?”

“In a moment of stupidity I let Wu Yong from Mount Liangshan, posing as a fortune teller, into my house. With lying words, he beguiled me to Mount Liangshan, where I was detained for more than two months. Fortunately, I was able to get away and come home. I have no evil intent. I pray Your Excellency will see into my heart.”

“Do you expect anyone to believe that! If you're not in league with them, why did you stay there so long? The wife you abandoned and Li Gu have both exposed you. Would they make false accusations?”

“Since it's come to this, master, you'd better confess,” Li Gu advised. “That poem you wrote on the wall at home has a hidden rebellious meaning. It's overwhelming proof. There's no need to say any more.”

“We don't want to injure you,” said Lu's wife, “but we're afraid you'll involve me. You know the old saying: 'When a man rebels, his family and all his relations must pay with their lives.'”

Kneeling before the governor, Lu cried that he was being wronged. “Don't say that, master,” Li Gu urged. “If the charge is true, you can't escape it. If it's false, you'll easily clear yourself in the end. But first confess, and you won't have to suffer a beating.”

Lu's wife agreed. “It's hard to get a false charge into court, husband, and it's equally hard to deny the facts. If you've committed a crime, you'll be the death of me! Will your sensitive skin be able to withstand the feelingless rods? Confess, and your sentence will be lighter!”

Li Gu had spread bribes high and low, and now Zhang the court clerk spoke up. “That stubborn villain! If he's not beaten he'll never confess!”

“Right,” said Governor Liang. “Beat him,” he shouted.

Policemen flung Lu Junyi face downward and pounded him till his skin split, his flesh protruded and blood flowed in rivulets. Three or four times he fainted. Finally, he could bear it no longer.

“I was destined for a violent death,” he sighed. “I'll make a false confession.”

As soon as the clerk obtained the confession, he had a hundred-catty rack for the condemned placed around Lu's neck and directed that he be taken to prison, to the distress of all spectators inside and outside the court. That same day Lu was pushed through the prison gates, led to a pavilion and forced to kneel. Seated on a bed was the superintendent of the city's two prisons, who was also the official executioner. He was Cai Fu, a native of the Northern Capital, known as Iron Arm for his strength with the executioner's blade.

Standing beside him was his brother Cai Qing, one of the guards. The people of Hebei Province like to make quips, and they gave Cai Qing the nickname Single Blossom because of his fondness for hanging a flower over one ear. Holding a courier's staff, he stood at his brother's side.

“Lock this condemned prisoner up,” Cai Fu said. “I'm going home for a while. I'll be back later.”

Cai Qing led Lu away.

Cai Fu rose and left the prison. He was passing through the gates when a man rounded a wall ahead. He was carrying a container of cooked rice and looked worried. It was Yan Qing the Prodigy.

“What are you up to, young brother?” Cai Fu asked.

Yan Qing dropped to his knees and wiped the tears rolling down his cheeks. “Brother Superintendent, have pity on my master Lu the Magnate,” he pleaded. “He's been wrongfully convicted and has no money to pay for food. I begged this half container of rice outside the city so that he'll have something to stem his hunger, permit me to give it to him, brother Superintendent, and you'll be doing a good deed!” Yan Qing, his voice choking, prostrated himself.

“I know about this case,” said Cai Fu. “You can bring him the rice.”

Yan Qing thanked him and entered the prison. As Cai Fu was crossing the prefectural bridge, a waiter hailed him respectfully.

“There's a customer upstairs in our tea-house, Superintendent. He's waiting to speak to you.”

Cai Fu went upstairs with the waiter and found Li Gu the chief steward. The two exchanged courtesies.

“What can I do for you, Chief Steward?”

“I've never concealed from you my good side or my evil. You know all about me, Superintendent. Tonight, I want you to finish him off. I've no other way to show my respect, but here are fifty ounces of gold in scallion shape. I'll take care of the other court officials and functionaries myself.”

Cai Fu laughed. “Haven't you read what's carved on the tablet in front of the court? *It's easy to oppress the people but hard to deceive Heaven.* You're so crooked you cheat yourself. Do you think I don't know? You've taken over his property and stolen his wife, and you offer me a paltry fifty ounces of

gold to kill him! If the Inspector General came down here and checked on me, I hate to think of the charge I'd have to face!”

“If it's not enough, Superintendent, I can add another fifty.”

“Li Gu, you're the kind who would feed his cat its own tail! Are you trying to tell me that Lu Junyi, well-known magnate of the Northern Capital, is worth only one hundred gold ounces? Get this straight— I'll need five hundred ounces of gold, if you expect me to do him in!”

“I have them here. You can have the whole amount, as long as you do the job tonight.”

Cai Fu took the gold and concealed it on his person. He stood up. “You can call for the body tomorrow morning.” Li Gu thanked him, and happily departed.

Cai Fu returned home. No sooner had he arrived than a man raised the door curtain and entered.

“How do you do, Superintendent,” the visitor said. A handsome man, he wore a round-collared gown the deep green of a raven's wing, a girdle with a buckle of mutton-fat jade. His turban was like the crown of a crested goose, his shoes were encrusted with pearls. He kowtowed before Cai Fu.

The superintendent hastily returned the salutation. “What is your name sir,” he asked, “and what do you want to see me about?”

“It would be better if we talked inside.”

Cai Fu invited his visitor into a conference alcove, where they seated themselves as host and guest. The caller opened the conversation.

“Don't be alarmed, Superintendent. I'm from the Heng hai Shire of Cangzhou Prefecture. My name is Chai Jin. I'm a direct descendent of the Zhou emperors, and I'm known as the Small Whirlwind. Because I'm chivalrous and generous, I've become acquainted with members of the gallant fraternity everywhere. Unfortunately, I committed a crime and had

to take refuge in Liangshan Marsh. I'm here today on orders of brother Song Jiang to inquire about Lu the Magnate. Who would have thought that due to the connivance of corrupt officials, an adulterous wife and her wicked lover, he would be cast into a cell for the condemned! His life is hanging by a thread, and his fate is in your hands. I'm calling at your home to tell you this, with no fear of the consequences to myself. If, with Buddha-like compassion, you keep Lu in this world, we shall not forget your great virtue. But if you permit an error even half the size of a grain of rice to occur, our soldiers will surround your city, our generals will arrive at your moats, and we'll smash our way in and slaughter the entire population, good and bad, old and young! We have long known that you are a bold fellow who is chivalrous and faithful. For want of a proper gift, we can present you only with a thousand ounces of gold. Now, if you want to arrest me, go ahead. Bind me with ropes. I swear I won't so much as frown."

In a cold sweat, Cai Fu was afraid to speak. Chai Jin rose. "When a gallant man does something, he doesn't dilly-dally. Let's have your answer."

"Please go back, sir. I can handle this."

"We have your promise. Your kindness will be rewarded." Chai Jin stepped out the door and summoned his companion. He took from him the gold and placed it in Cai Fu's hands. Then he bid the superintendent a courteous farewell and departed. The companion was none other than Dai Zong the Marvellous Traveller—another man not easily put off!

But Cai Fu wasn't sure how to go about it. He thought for some time, then returned to the prison and conferred with his brother.

"Ordinarily, you're good at making decisions," said Cai Qing. "A small matter like this—what's so hard about it! As the old saying goes: 'Prove a killing with a show of blood, a rescue must be thorough or it's not any good.' Since we've got a thousand ounces of gold, we'll spread some of it around, high and low. Governor Liang and Clerk Zhang both have itchy palms. Once they've taken the bribes, they'll naturally spare Lu's life, and simply exile him to some distant place or other. Whether he's rescued or not is up to the bold fellows of Liangshan Marsh. We can only do our part."

“That suits me fine. Transfer Magnate Lu to a better place of confinement, and see to it that he gets good food and drink every day. Let him know what we're doing.”

The two brothers came to an agreement. They secretly dispensed gold high and low, judiciously placing their bribes.

The next day, learning that nothing had happened, Li Gu went to Cai Fu's home and urged him to take action. Cai Qing said: “We were about to do it, but Governor Liang wouldn't permit us. He has ordered that Lu's life be spared. You work on the higher-ups. If they give us the word, there won't be any problem.”

Li Gu sent an intermediary with money to see Governor Liang. But the governor only said: “This is a matter for the superintendent in charge of the prisons. Am I supposed to kill him myself? In a day or two I'll tell him to see to it.”

Thus the governor and the superintendent each pushed the decision off onto the other. Clerk Zhang, who had received money from Li Gu, kept postponing a final disposition of the case. But Cai Fu came to him with another bribe and urged him to get it settled. Zhang drafted a judgment and brought it to Governor Liang.

“How shall we dispose of this?” asked the governor.

“It seems to me that although there's a complaint against Lu, there isn't any real evidence. He did stay in Liangshan Marsh for a long time, true, but he was inveigled into it, and we can't get at the real culprit. Give him forty blows and exile him three thousand *li*. How does that sound to Your Excellency?”

“Very intelligent. It suits me perfectly.”

The governor directed Cai Fu to bring Lu Junyi before him. In open court he had the rack removed, read aloud the confession, and imposed a beating of forty blows. A leafed iron rack of twenty catties was then locked around

Lu's neck and the governor sentenced the prisoner to Shamen Island. He instructed Dong Chao and Xue Ba to escort him there under guard.

These two originally had been policemen in Kaifeng Prefecture, and been ordered privately to kill Lin Chong while taking him to Cangzhou. Because they failed to do so, Marshal Gao Qiu had found an excuse for banishing them to the Northern Capital. Governor Liang, discovering that they were a competent pair, had added them to his staff. Now he directed them to escort Lu into exile.

Dong and Xue received the official sentence document and took Lu the Magnate from court to the dispatch office, and there had him detained. The guards then went home to pack their luggage and prepare for the journey.

When Li Gu heard about this, he groaned. He sent a man to invite the two guards for a chat. Li Gu received Dong Chao and Xue Ba at a tavern, conducted them to seats in a private room, and there served them with food and wine. After each had drunk three cups, Li Gu spoke.

“I won't try to deceive you—Lu the Magnate is my enemy. He is being banished to Shamen Island, which is a long way from here, but he hasn't a penny, and you two will have to foot all your own travel expenses. Even if you move very quickly, the round trip will take you at least three or four months. I haven't any proper gift, only these two silver ingots to burden your hands. When you reach a convenient place, a number of *li* away, or at most two stages from here, kill him. Bring back the tattoo on his face as proof and I'll give you each fifty ounces of gold in addition. All you have to do is write up some false report. I'll attend to the people in the governor's office.”

Dong and Xue looked at each other. There was a long silence. The large silver ingots were a strong temptation.

“I'm only afraid we couldn't bring it off,” Dong said.

“Brother,” Xue remonstrated, “Master Li is a fine gentleman. We ought to do this for him. If ever we have any problems, he'll surely look after us.”

“I never forget a favor,” said Li Gu. “I'll gradually repay you.”

The two guards accepted the silver, said goodbye, returned to their quarters, and gathered their luggage. The same night, they set out.

“I'm still in pain from the beating I had today,” said Lu. “Couldn't we start tomorrow?”

“Shut your friggin mouth,” said Xue. “It's rotten luck for gents like us to be stuck with a pauper like you! To Shamen Island and back is over six thousand *li.* Travel expenses are going to be enormous, but you haven't a penny. How are we going to manage!”

“Have pity. I've been wrongfully convicted.”

“You rich usually won't even give a fellow a hair off their hide,” said Dong. “Well, Heaven isn't blind, and now you're getting what you deserve! Don't complain. We'll help you walk.”

Lu could only swallow his anger and move along. They left through the East Gate, and the guards hung their luggage and umbrellas on Lu Junyi's rack. As a prisoner, there was nothing he could do about it.

By dusk, they had covered fourteen or fifteen *li.* There was a town ahead, and they looked for a place to spend the night. The waiter led them to a room in the rear and they set down their bundles.

“We are, after all, gentlemen of the police,” Xue Ba said to Lu. “Are we to dance attendance on a prisoner? If you want to eat, cook up some rice!”

Lu had no choice but to go to the kitchen, with the rack around his neck, and ask the waiter for fuel stalks. He twisted these into a bundle and made a fire in the stove. The waiter put rice on to boil and washed bowls and chopsticks for him. Lu had been born rich, and he didn't know how to do these things. The fuel was wet. It didn't burn well, and kept going out. Lu blew hard to keep it alight, and got his eyes full of ashes.

Dong grumbled and scolded. When the rice was cooked, the two guards helped themselves. Lu dared not take anything. The two finished eating, and allowed Lu to have the remainder of their soup and their cold rice. Xue cursed him continuously.

The meal over, Xue ordered Lu to heat water so that they could wash their feet. Only when the water was boiling hot did Lu venture to sit down in the room. The guards finished bathing their feet, then brought a basin of sizzling water for Lu. The moment he removed his straw sandals, Xue plunged his feet into the water. The pain was agonizing.

“A gentleman waits on you, and you have the nerve to grimace,” snarled Xue.

The guards chained Lu behind the door, where he groaned all night. They themselves slept on the brick *kang* bed. At the fourth watch they got up and ordered the waiter to make breakfast. They ate, gathered their bundles and prepared to set forth. Lu's feet were blistered from the scalding. He could scarcely stand.

What's more, it was a rainy autumn day, and the road was slippery. Lu skidded and stumbled with every step. Xue drove him on with blows of his staff, while Dong pretended to urge leniency. Xue complained and grumbled all along the way. They travelled more than ten *li* and came to a large forest.

“I really can't move,” said Lu. “Have pity and let me rest.”

The guards led him into the forest as the east was turning light. No one else was abroad.

“My partner and I got up very early this morning,” Xue Ba said to Lu. “We're quite tired and would like to take a nap. But we're afraid you'll run away.”

“Even if I sprouted wings I couldn't escape.”

“We're not going to let you trick us. I'll tie you up.” With the rope he had hanging at his waist Xue bound Lu around the middle to a pine tree, then pulled his feet back and fastened them as well.

“Go to the edge of the forest and keep watch, brother,” Xue said to Dong. “Cough as a signal if anyone comes.”

“Brother, do the job quickly!”

“Don't worry. Just keep watch.”

Xue raised his official staff. “You mustn't blame us two,” he said to Lu. “Your steward Li Gu told us to kill you during the journey. You'd die anyway after you got to Shamen Island. It's better to dispatch you here. Don't complain about us in the Nether Regions. A year from now will be the first anniversary of your death!”

His tears falling like rain, Lu lowered his head and waited to die. Xue raised his staff with both hands and started a blow at Lu's temple. Dong, on the edge of the forest, heard a thud, and he hurried back to look. The magnate was still tied to the tree, but Xue was lying face up at Lu's feet, the staff dropped to one side.

“Strange,” Dong muttered. “Did he swing so hard that he tripped and fell?”

Dong tried to help him up, but couldn't budge him. Then he saw that blood was flowing from Xue's mouth, and three or four inches of a slender arrow protruded from his chest. Before Dong could yell, a man sitting in a tree to the northeast cried: “Here it is!” A bowstring twanged and an arrow lodged itself in Dong's throat. His feet flew up and he landed heavily.

The man leaped down from his perch, whipped out a dagger, cut the ropes binding Lu, and smashed open the rack around his neck. Then he threw his arms around the magnate and wept aloud. Lu opened his eyes and recognize Yan Qing.

“Is this my ghost meeting you now?” Lu cried.

“I waited outside the chancellery and followed you and the guards,” said Yan Qing. “The rogues wanted to kill you in this forest! But with two arrows from my crossbow I finished them both. Did you see it?”

“You've saved my life,” said Lu. “But killing those two guards makes my crime more severe. Where can I go?”

“It was Song Jiang who started all this trouble. Where else except Mount Liangshan?”

“My wounds still hurt from the beating and my feet are torn. I can't walk.”

“You mustn't delay. I'll carry you on my back.”

Yan Qing kicked the two bodies aside, picked up his crossbow, tucked his dagger in its sheath, collected the official staves, lifted Lu onto his back, and headed east. By the time he had walked ten *li* or so, he was exhausted. They saw a small village inn, entered, and asked for a room. They bought some meat and wine to appease their hunger. For the time being, they remained at the inn.

Passers-by found the bodies of the two guards in the forest. The chief of the nearby hamlet informed the local village head, who in turn notified Darning Prefecture. An officer sent to investigate identified the victims as Dong Chao and Xue Ba, police guards in the governor's chancellery.

Governor Liang, on receiving the report, instructed the Inspector of Police of Darning to apprehend the criminals within a fixed time. Police, examining the scene of the crime, said: “These crossbow arrows are clearly Yan Qing's. We'd better move fast.” Nearly two hundred policemen went separately to every home and inn in every town and village far and near and put up “Wanted” posters describing the two culprits in detail.

Lu Junyi, unable to walk, stayed at the inn recovering from his wounds. When the waiter heard about the murder, he could talk of nothing else. He

noted the resemblance of his guests to the sketches in the “Wanted” posters, and hurried to the hamlet chief.

“There are two strange men staying at our inn,” he said. “I wonder whether they could be the ones?”

The hamlet chief relayed this information to the authorities.

In search of something tasty, Yan Qing went with his crossbow to the nearby fields and shot some game. On his return, he found the whole village in an uproar. He hid in a grove of trees and watched. Two hundred policemen, armed with spears and swords, surrounded Lu Junyi, who was bound on a cart which was being pushed away. Yan Qing wanted to rush out and save him, but he had no military equipment, and could only groan.

“If I don't go to Mount Liangshan and get Song Jiang to come to the rescue,” thought Yan Qing, “I'll be throwing my master's life away!”

He left immediately. He was still travelling by the middle of the night. He was hungry, but he hadn't any money. Yan Qing came to a small hill. It was covered with underbrush and had a few trees. He went into a grove and slept till daylight. He awoke very depressed. A magpie was chattering in a tree.

“If I can shoot that down,” he thought, “I can beg some boiling water from a villager and cook it. That will ease my hunger pangs.”

Emerging from the grove, he looked up. The bird cawed at him raucously. Yan Qing softly removed his crossbow from its sheath and offered a silent prayer: “I've only this one arrow. If my master is going to be saved, let it bring the magpie down. If my master is fated to die, let the magpie fly away unscathed.”

He fitted the arrow to the string and shouted: “Bow, don't fail me!” The trigger mechanism twanged and the arrow hit the bird in the tail. It flew

down the hill, the arrow trailing from its rump. Yan Qing gave chase, but he lost sight of his quarry.

While he was searching, he saw two men coming his way. The one in the lead wore a turban shaped like a pig's snout. Gold-traced silver rings dangled at the back of his head. A gown of fragrant black silk was bound at the waist by a gold-figured sash. He was shod in hempen sandals over soft stockings that reached his knees, and he carried a staff as high his eyebrows. The man behind had a broad-brimmed white felt hat on his head, a tea-colored gown with embroidered sleeves, a pink purse at his middle, and heavy leather shoes. On his back was a bundle of clothing. He carried a short cudgel. A knife hung at his waist.

They passed so close by, they almost brushed shoulders with Yan Qing. He turned and looked after them and thought: “I have no travelling money. If I knock those two down and take the purse it will be easier for me to get to Liangshan Marsh.”

He hung his bow behind him and followed. The two, heads down, were concentrating on walking. Yan Qing caught up with the rear man in the felt hat. He punched him square in the back and knocked him down. But before he could hit the man in front, the fellow raised his staff and cracked Yan Qing on the left shin, tumbling him to the ground. The rear man meanwhile got up, planted a foot on Yan Qing, pulled out a dagger and poised to stab.

“Bold fellow,” Yan Qing cried, “it doesn't matter if I die, but who will deliver my message?”

The man hesitated and lowered his arm, then pulled Yan Qing up. “What message have you, knave?”

“Why do you ask?”

The other man grasped Yan Qing's hand and pulled it forward, exposing the tattooing on his wrist. “Aren't you Yan Qing, the one they call the Prodigy, in the household of Lu the Magnate?” he asked.

Yan Qing thought: “One way or another, I'm going to die. I might as well tell the truth and let him arrest me, so that I can go to the next world with my master!” Aloud, he said: “Yes, I am!”

The two men laughed. “It's a good thing we didn't kill you. So you're young brother Yan! Do you know who we are? I am Yang Xiong the Pallid. And this is Shi Xui the Rash.”

“We've been ordered by brother Song Jiang to proceed to the Northern Capital and inquire about Lu the Magnate,” said Yang Xiong. “Our Military Advisor and Dai Zong have also come down from the mountain and are waiting for news.”

Yan Qing told them everything that had transpired, and Yang said: “In that case I'll take you to brother Song Jiang in the fortress and we can decide what to do. You, Shi Xiu, go on to the Northern Capital, see what you can find out, and report back.”

“Right,” said Shi Xiu. He gave Yan Qing a muffin and dried meat to eat, and left him his bundle to carry.

The Prodigy went with Yang Xiong. They travelled through the night to the mountain fortress, where Yan Qing met Song Jiang and told the story in full. Shocked, Song Jiang summoned his chieftains for a conference.

We'll talk now of Shi Xiu. With only the clothes he wore on his back, he arrived at the outskirts of the Northern Capital. It was already turning dark and he was unable to enter the city, so he rested that night outside. He went in the next morning after breakfast.

He observed that people were sighing, and seemed quite downcast. Puzzled, he proceeded to the center of town. The door of every home was closed. He asked an old man what was wrong.

“Traveller, you wouldn't know,” the old man replied. “Here in the Northern Capital we have a Lu the Magnate. He's one of our richest men. He was

snatched away by the robbers of Liangshan Marsh and managed to escape. But when he came home he was convicted on a wrongful charge and sentenced to Shamen Island. Somehow, on the way, the two guards escorting him were killed. Last night, Lu was captured again, and today, at the third quarter after noon, he's going to be executed here in the middle of the city! You'll be able to see it."

To Shi Xiu the news was like a douse of icy water. He walked on. At the main intersection was a two-storied tavern. He entered, went up the stairs, and sat down in a small room overlooking the street.

"Are you having other guests, or are you drinking alone, sir?" the waiter asked.

Shi Xiu glared. "A big bowl of wine and a large platter of meat. Just bring them and let's not have any friggin questions!"

Startled, the waiter poured two measures of wine and sliced a large platter of beef. Shi Xiu ate and drank steadily. Before long, he heard a growing hubbub in the street below. He looked out the window. The door of every home and shop was shut tight.

The waiter came up the stairs and said: "You must be drunk, sir! There's going to be a public execution down there. Pay your bill and go someplace else, quickly!"

"That stuff doesn't scare me. Get out of here before I give you a taste of my fists!"

Not daring to reply, the waiter went back downstairs.

On the street gongs crashed and drums thundered. Shi Xiu watched from his window. Crowds jammed all sides of the execution place. A dozen pairs of guards, bearing swords or staves, pulled and pushed Lu forward and compelled him to kneel outside the tavern building. Iron Arm Cai Fu carried the official sword of execution. Single Blossom Cai Qing held Lu's rack.

“Magnate Lu,” said Cai Fu, “you can see for yourself. It isn't that we two didn't want to save you. Circumstances are forcing us to do this! We've already arranged a seat for you in that Temple of the Five Saints ahead. Your soul can go there and claim it.”

From the crowd a voice shouted: “It's three quarters after noon!”

Cai Qing removed Lu's rack and grasped his head. Cai Fu raised the executioner's sword. The clerk read in a loud voice the crimes listed on the condemned man's placard. The crowd of spectators gasped in anticipation.

And with that sound, Shi Xiu, dagger in hand at the upstairs window of the tavern, let out a yell:

“The bold fellows of Liangshan Marsh are all here!”

Cai Fu and Cai Qing pushed Lu aside, grabbed the ropes which had bound him, and ran. Shi Xiu leaped down from the window and wielded his steel knife, killing men like hacking melons and slicing vegetables. He downed a dozen or more before they could get away. He grabbed Lu with one hand and pushed south. Shi Xiu didn't know the Northern Capital streets, and Lu was too stunned to do more than stumble along.

Governor Liang was astounded when he heard the news. He immediately summoned his highest commanders and directed them to have their soldiers seal off all four city gates. He sent his entire police force after the fugitives.

Pursued by fast horses and powerful troops, could Shi Xiu and Lu the Magnate scale the high city walls and towering ramparts? Where could they go? They had no claws for burrowing into the ground, and no wings to fly them up to the blue sky.

Did Lu the Magnate and Shi Xiu escape? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 63
Song Jiang Attacks the Northern Capital with

Troops
Guan Sheng Discusses How to Take Mount Liangshan

There was no way for Shi Xiu and Lu the Magnate to get out of the city. Police surrounded them and snared them with long hooked poles and looped ropes. In spite of their courage, the two couldn't resist overwhelming numbers. They were caught and brought before the governor, their captors crying that here was the rogue who had raided the execution grounds.

Shi Xiu was hustled into court. He stood, glaring. “You're a crook who ruins the country and injures the people, a slave of a slave,” he shouted at Liang. “Soon my brother Song Jiang and his army will attack your city and trample it flat and hack you into three pieces! I've been sent on ahead to notify you louts!”

The onlookers were stupefied at Shi Xiu's revilement of the governor in open court. But Liang listened. For several minutes he was sunk in thought. Finally he ordered that a big rack be fastened on each of the prisoners and that they be cast into the jail for the condemned. He put Cai Fu in charge, warning him against any slip-ups.

Cai Fu wanted to be on good terms with the gallants of Mount Liangshan. And so he detained his charges in a cell together, and every day served them good food and wine. As a result, they did not suffer, in fact they lived quite well.

Liang then summoned Wang, the newly appointed prefect, and asked him for a list of the casualties in the fracas. Seventy or eighty had been killed, and innumerable others had sustained head injuries, lacerations and fractured limbs. Liang dispensed government funds for medical treatment for the wounded and cremation for the dead.

The next day news began coming in of dozens of proclamations which had been posted inside and outside the city by the Mount Liangshan forces. Citizens, not daring to conceal them, reported the proclamations to the authorities. Governor Liang read one, and his soul flew up to Ninth Heaven in fright. It ran as follows:

Song Jiang, a Liangshan Marsh fighter for righteousness, hereby notifies the authorities of Darning and all its inhabitants: Lu Junyi of the Northern Capital is a man of honor. We recently invited him to our mountain stronghold to carry out together with us the Will of Heaven and dispatched Shi Xiu to inform you of this. To our surprise you seized them both. If they are not harmed, and you turn over to us the adulterous wife and her lover, we will not intervene. If however you injure these men who are our wings, our limbs, we shall descend from our fortress in full force and take vengeance, incinerating and destroying everything, good or bad. Heaven and Earth will support us, and the spirits will assist. We shall wipe out the treacherous and exterminate the stubborn. Easily we shall enter the city, but not lightly will our wrath be appeased. Virtuous husbands and wives, filial sons and grandsons, righteous citizens and clean officials need have no fear. They may go peacefully about their affairs. Let all be thus advised.

Liang again summoned Prefect Wang. “How shall we deal with this?” he queried.

Wang was a weak and timid person. “The imperial court sent soldiers to arrest that gang on Mount Liangshan several times, but they failed,” he said. “What can a small city like ours do? If those wild villains attack before imperial forces come to the rescue, we'll be finished. I have a suggestion. Spare the lives of the two prisoners, but write a plea to the imperial court and notify his excellency Premier Cai. At the same time send our local troops out to prepare to repel any raiders. This will preserve the city and protect its inhabitants. If we execute those two, the brigands may attack immediately before reinforcements can arrive. The imperial court will blame us and the citizens will be thrown into a panic. It will be a nasty situation.”

“Your proposal is quite sound,” said Governor Liang. He summoned superintendent Cai Fu and gave him his instructions.

“Those two are no ordinary culprits,” he said. “If you're too hard on them, they may die. If you're too soft, they may escape. I want you and your brother to watch them day and night. Be flexible, but keep them under constant guard. Don't relax for a moment.”

Cai Fu was delighted with this order, since it fitted in precisely with what he had in mind. On leaving the governor he went to reassure the two prisoners. Of that we'll say no more.

Governor Liang then called his generals, Wen Da the Mighty Sword and Li Cheng the King of the Skies, to his residency for a conference. He told them of the proclamations from Liangshan Marsh and what Prefect Wang had proposed. Li Cheng was contemptuous.

“So those petty bandits may dare to emerge from their lair,” he said. “It's nothing for you to be concerned about, Excellency. I'm not talented, and I've eaten much of the public larder without performing any meritorious deeds. Now I would like to do my utmost. Let me lead my soldiers forth and encamp outside the city. If the bandits don't come, we can discuss what to do next. Though strong, their days are numbered. I'm not boasting, but if they do venture out and attack, I guarantee not one of them will return alive!”

Liang was very pleased. He rewarded the commanders with gold and silks. The two thanked him, took their leave, and returned to their respective posts.

The following morning Li Cheng summoned his officers to his tent to confer. From among them Suo Chao, a handsome, impressive man came forward. He was known as the Urgent Vanguard, and his weapons were a pair of golden battle-axes.

“The bandit Song Jiang is coming soon to attack our Northern Capital,” Li Cheng said. “Muster your soldiers, march them thirty-five *li* from the city and make camp. I will follow with more troops.”

The next morning Suo Chao did as ordered. He halted at a place called Flying-Tiger Valley, and built a fortified encampment at the foot of the hills.

Li Cheng, the day after, left the city with leaders of his middle and flanking units, marched twenty-five *li* to Locust Tree Slope, and there set up a stockaded camp. Both camps bristled with spears and knives. Branched stakes, like sharp deer antlers, were firmly embedded on the perimeters. On three sides deep pits were dug. The soldiers rubbed their hands in anticipation, eager to distinguish themselves and win glory for the emperor.

We'll divide our story into two parts. Those proclamation notices were written by Wu Yong after hearing the news from Yan Qing and Yang Xiong. On learning from Dai Zong that Lu the Magnate and Shi Xiu had been captured, he had them put up when no one was around on bridges and roadways. Dai returned to the mountain fortress and told the chieftains in detail what had transpired.

Song Jiang was shocked. He at once had the drums sounded to summon the chieftains to Loyalty Hall. They took their seats in order of rank. Song addressed himself to Wu Yong.

“You meant well at the time, inviting Lu the Magnate up the mountain to join our band. But because of this, today he's in trouble, and brother Shi Xiu as well. What can we do to rescue them?”

“Don't worry, brother. I'm not talented, but I have a plan. We can use this opportunity to relieve the Northern Capital of its money and grain for our own use! Tomorrow is an auspicious day. Divide our chieftains into two. Leave half here to guard the fort. Give me the other half to attack the city.”

Song Jiang directed Ironclad Virtue Pei Xuan to muster the necessary forces to march the following day.

“These two big axes of mine haven't had any action for a long time,” said Li Kui the Black Whirlwind. “I'm glad to hear we're going to fight and pillage again. Let me have five hundred men and I'll take the Northern Capital, hack Governor Liang into mincemeat, dismember the corpses of Li Gu and that adulterous female, and rescue Lu the Magnate and Shi Xiu! The 'mute acolyte' will get his revenge. I'll do a thorough job of it.”

“Although you're brave, brother,” Song Jiang replied, “the Northern Capital isn't like other prefectures. What's more, Governor Liang is the son-in-law of Premier Cai, and his generals Li Cheng and Wen Da are of matchless courage. They're not to be underestimated.”

“You knew I'm quick to speak, yet you let me go disguised as a mute,” Li Kui yelled. “But now, though you know I like to kill, you won't let me be the vanguard. Do you want to aggravate me into my grave!”

“Since you insist,” said Wu Yong, “you can go as a vanguard. Take five hundred bold fellows and set up an advance position. You can start tomorrow.”

That evening Song Jiang and Wu Yong decided on the number of men to be used in the campaign. Pei Xuan wrote a notice which he dispatched to various installations on the mountain, outlining the order of march according to contingents and directing prompt execution.

It was then the end of autumn and the beginning of winter, a comfortable time for wearing armor, and the horses were sleek and fat. For a long time the men had not seen battle, and they longed for action. The hatred they felt was intense, and they were determined to wreak vengeance. Happy with their mission, they gathered their weapons, and saddled and bridled their steeds. They rubbed their hands, ready to start down the mountain at the appointed hour.

The first contingent, the vanguard, consisted of five hundred men under Li Kui the Black Whirlwind. The second, under Two-Headed Snake Xie Zhen, Twin-Tailed Scorpion Xie Bao, Kong Ming the Comet and Kong Liang the Flaming Star, consisted of a thousand men. The third also contained a thousand men and was led by the girl Ten Feet of Steel, and her lieutenants Sun the Witch and Mistress Gu the Tigress. The fourth was headed by Li Ying the Heaven-Soaring Eagle, assisted by Nine Dragons Shi Jin and Sun Xin the Junior General, and also contained a thousand men.

Song Jiang was the commander-in-chief of the central army, with Wu Yong as his military advisor. His four aides were Lu Fang the Little Duke, Guo Sheng the Second Ren Gui, Sun Li the Sickly General and Huang Xin the

Suppressor of the Three Mountains. Qin Ming the Thunderbolt led the forward army, seconded by Han Tao the Ever-Victorious General and Peng Qi the Eyes of Heaven General. Panther Head Lin Chong commanded the rear army, and his lieutenants were Ma Lin the Elfin Flutist and Deng Fei the Fiery-Eyed Lion. The left army was commanded by Two Rods Huyan Zhuo, assisted by Golden Wings Brushing the Clouds Ou Peng and Yan Shun the Elegant Tiger. Hua Rong led the right army, aided by Chen Da the Gorge-Leaping Tiger and Yang Chun the White-Spotted Snake.

Also on the expedition were the cannon expert Heaven-Shaking Thunder Ling Zhen, who was in charge of grain for the men and fodder for the horses, and Dai Zong the Marvellous Traveller who was responsible for collecting military intelligence.

Each contingent, under its respective leader set out at daybreak in the prescribed order. Only the Deputy Military Advisor Gongsun Sheng was left behind with a body of men to guard the fortress and its three passes, assisted by Liu Tang, Zhu Tong and Mu Hong. The waterside fort was held by Li Jun and others. Of that we'll say no more.

We'll speak now of Suo Chao, seated in his camp in Flying-Tiger Valley. A horseman sped up like a meteor and announced that Song Jiang was approaching with an army of countless thousands. They were only twenty or thirty *li* away. Suo Chao immediately sent word to Li Cheng on Locust Tree Slope. The general hurriedly relayed the information to the city. At the same time he mounted his charger and rode directly to the forward camp. Suo Chao greeted him and told him the news in detail.

At dawn the next day the defenders breakfasted. When it was light they broke camp, moved forward to the Yu Family Hamlet, and deployed fifteen thousand infantry and cavalry in battle positions. Li Cheng and Suo Chao, in full armor, reined their horses beneath a pennant-decorated arch. Far to the east more than five hundred men could be seen flying towards them in a cloud of dust. Riding in the fore was Black Whirlwind Li Kui, a battle-ax in each hand. Glaring, he ground his teeth and shouted: “Your lord Black Whirlwind from Mount Liangshan is here!”

Li Cheng turned to Suo Chao with a laugh. “Every day we hear about the bold fellows from Liangshan Marsh. Why, they're just a pack of dirty bandits, not worth mentioning! Vanguard Commander, why don't you nab the louts?”

Suo Chao smiled. “There's no need for me to act. We have plenty of field officers eager for glory.”

Before the words were out of his mouth, a senior officer named Wang Ding, twirling a lance, galloped forward with a hundred horsemen. Li Kui and his men couldn't withstand the united cavalry charge, and they fled in all directions. Suo Chao and his forces chased them past Yu Family Hamlet.

Behind the hill, gongs and drums suddenly resounded, and two cavalry troops rode forth. On the left was Xie Zhen and Kong Liang, on the right was Kong Ming and Xie Bao, and each troop contained five hundred fierce riders.

Startled by the appearance of these reinforcements, Suo Chao stopped his pursuit and hastily returned.

“Why didn't you capture the bandits?” Li Cheng demanded.

“We chased them beyond the hill and were about to take them when the rogues were reinforced. Their support had been waiting in ambush. We couldn't follow through.”

“They're only bushwhackers. What's there be afraid of!”

Li Cheng led his entire forward army in a charge past Yu Family Hamlet. Ahead he saw banners wave, and heard yells and the thunder of drums and the crash of gongs. Another cavalry troop appeared. At the head of this one was a girl warrior, very smartly accoutred. On the red banner in front of the unit she was leading, the words *Female General Ten Feet of Steel* were inscribed in letters of gold. Mistress Gu was on her left, Sun the Witch on her right, and together they led a force of over a thousand. Their men were of every size and description and hailed from many different parts of the country.

When Li Cheng saw them he said to Suo Chao: “Soldiers like that are absolutely useless. Go at them directly, while I surround them with my troops.”

Grasping his golden axes, Suo Chao struck his horse and galloped forward. Ten Feet of Steel turned her mount and raced for a hollow in the hills. Li Cheng, who had spread out his force, tore after her.

Suddenly, he heard earth-shaking yells. Charging towards him was Li Ying the Heaven-Soaring Eagle, flanked by Shi Jin and Sun Xin. Hastily, he and his soldiers retreated into Yu Family Hamlet. But then they were assaulted from the left by a contingent led by Xie Zhen and Kong Liang, and from the right by the unit under Xie Bao and Kong Ming. Meanwhile, the three women commanders had wheeled their troop around and were catching up from the rear.

So hot was the pursuit that Li Cheng and his men were scattered.

They pressed desperately on to return to camp. Ahead, they found Li Kui the Black Whirlwind blocking their path. Li Cheng and Suo Chao managed to dash through. By the time they reached the camp, they had suffered huge losses.

Song Jiang and his army did not chase them any further. They reassembled for a short rest, then made camp.

Li Cheng and Suo Chao hurried to the city and reported to Governor Liang. That same night Wen Da was rushed to the battle area with local reinforcements. Li Cheng received him in the camp on Locust Tree Slope and raised the question of a withdrawal strategy. Wen Da laughed.

“Those bandits are only a slight itch. They're nothing to worry about!”

That night they agreed on a plan and instructed the troops. At the fourth watch everyone had breakfast, at the fifth they donned their armor, at daylight they marched. Thrice the battle drums rolled as they broke camp and advanced towards Yu Family Hamlet.

Soon they saw Song Jiang's army, sweeping towards them like the wind. Wen Da the Mighty Sword spread his troops out in battle formation, and ordered his archers to shoot and stop the front ranks of the advancing foe. Song Jiang selected one of his senior officers to go forth. He bore a red banner with the words writ large in silver: *Qin Ming the Thunderbolt.*

Qin Ming reined his horse and shouted: “You corrupt officials of the Northern Capital, listen! We've been intending to attack your city for a long time. Only a fear of hurting its good people has prevented us. Turn over Lu Junyi and Shi Xiu, surrender the adulterous pair, and we'll withdraw and swear we won't encroach. If you are stubborn, you'll bring fire down on your own heads that will melt jade and stones! Those are your only prospects. If you've anything to say, speak now, without delay!”

“Who will seize that varlet for me?” Wen Da furiously cried.

Before he had finished speaking, Suo Chao advanced to the front and shouted: “You were an officer appointed by the imperial court. How has the government ever wronged you? Instead of behaving like a proper person you've become a wretched bandit! I'm going to pulverise you when I catch you today!”

To Qin Ming the words were like coal in a stove, oil on a fire. He clapped his horse and charged, whirling his wolf-toothed cudgel.

Suo Chao spurred his mount to meet him. Two spirited horses collided, two sets of weapons clashed, the armies on both sides yelled. The contestants fought more than twenty rounds, with neither the victor.

Han Tao moved up on horseback from the ranks of Song Jiang's vanguard unit. He fitted an arrow to his bow, aimed, and let fly. The arrow struck Suo Chao in the left arm. He dropped his axes, turned and cantered back to his position.

Song Jiang pointed with his whip and all three armies surged forward. Corpses soon covered the plain, blood flowed in rivers. It was a crushing defeat. The Song Jiang forces chased the running foe past Yu Family Hamlet, then captured Locust Tree Slope. Wen Da fled all the way to

Flying-Tiger Valley. When he counted his soldiers, he found he had lost a third.

On Locust Tree Slope Song Jiang made camp. Wu Yong said: “Beaten troops are always frightened. We ought to go after them before they recover their nerve. It's too good a chance to miss.”

“You're quite right, Military Advisor,” replied Song Jiang. He circulated the order that his crack victorious forces should that evening divide into four columns and march through the night to attack the city.

As to Wen Da, he had just caught his breath after returning to Flying-Tiger Valley, when a junior officer entered and announced a row of fires on a nearby hilltop. Wen Da mounted his horse and went out with a troop of soldiers to look. There, on a hill to the east, countless torches were turning the hills and the surrounding fields red.

To the west, too, fires gleamed. Wen Da led his men hastily in that direction. Suddenly, from behind he heard thunderous shouts. Racing in pursuit from the east was Hua Rong, followed by Yang Chun and Chen Da. Panic-stricken, Wen Da led his soldiers quickly back to Flying-Tiger Valley.

But then, from the glowing torches in the west Two Rods Huyan Zhuo, with Ou Peng and Yan Shun as his second in command, came charging downward. Pincers from east and west were closing in. And from the rear, there were more yells, and Qin Ming the Thunderbolt, aided by Han Tao and Peng Qi, raced up to join the fray. Shouting men and neighing horses milled in the firelight without number.

Wen Da's army was thrown into confusion. They broke camp and left. Again they heard yells, this time before them. There were bursts of flame Heaven-Shaking Thunder Ling Zhen and his assistants had slipped around to the side of Flying-Tiger Valley via small paths and were bombarding with their cannon.

Wen Da and troops plunged through and raced for the city. Ahead of them drums pounded. A troop of cavalry was blocking their way. In the firelight Panther Head Lin Chong moved forward, aided by Ma Lin and Deng Fei.

On all sides drums thundered in unison and fierce flames erupted. The government soldiers, in turmoil, fled for their lives.

Swinging his sword, Wen Da was hacking his way through when he ran into Li Cheng. The two joined forces and fought a withdrawal action. By dawn they had battled to the outskirts of the city.

When Governor Liang heard the news, his soul was shaken from his body. He hastily mustered troops and sent them out to bring in the defeated soldiers. Then he locked the city gates and tightened his defenses.

The following morning Song Jiang's forces arrived. They pushed straight up to the East Gate and there made camp. They prepared to attack.

In the city's military headquarters Governor Liang called a conference. It was difficult to see any solution.

“The brigands are at our gates,” said Li Cheng. “The situation is desperate. If we delay any longer, we'll be lost. You must immediately write a personal family letter, Excellency, to the premier, and send it by trusted emissary tonight. The premier will then be able to petition the emperor in the morning court to dispatch crack troops to our rescue. That would be best. Second, you should also officially notify all neighboring prefectures and counties to send relief troops quickly. Third, instruct the Darning Prefecture to conscript civilians to go up on the walls of the Northern Capital and help defend the city. Let them keep in readiness throwing logs, ballista stones, blinding lime and molten metal. Have them cock the crossbows, and be vigilant day and night. In this manner we can guarantee against mishaps.”

“I can write the letter easily enough, but who will carry it?” Said the governor. That same day he designated one of his leading commanders, Wang Ding. Wang donned full armor, selected a couple of cavalrymen, and took the letter. The city gate was opened, the drawbridge lowered, the messengers went off to the Eastern Capital at flying speed. Neigh boring prefectures and counties were officially notified to rush relief troops. Prefect Wang was directed to muster civilians for the defense of the city walls. Of that we'll say no more.

Song Jiang divided his forces and established camps on the north, east and west of the city, leaving only the approaches to the south gate open. Every day he attacked, at the same time urging the mountain stronghold to send grain and fodder for a long siege. He was determined to break into Darning and rescue Magnate Lu and Shi Xiu. Every day Li Cheng and Wen Da came out with soldiers and gave battle, but they were unable to win. Suo Chao was recuperating from his arrow wound, which had not yet healed.

Wang Ding and the other two riders arrived at the residency of the premier with the private letter and dismounted. The keeper of the gate went in and reported. The premier directed that Wang Ding be allowed to enter. Wang went directly to the rear hall, kowtowed and presented the message. Premier Cai Jing opened the letter and read it. Shocked, he closely questioned Wang Ding. The emissary related the story of Lu Junyi in detail, adding, “Song Jiang has surrounded the city with a huge force of bandits. We can't cope with them.” He told also of the murderous battles at Yu Family Hamlet, Locust Tree Slope and Flying-Tiger Valley.

“You've had a tiring ride,” said Cai. “Go to the government hostel and rest. I must hold a conference of officials.”

“The Northern Capital is in a terrible dilemma, Your Excellency. It faces disaster. If it should fall, what will happen to the rest of Hebei Province? We hope Your Excellency will send troops quickly and destroy the rebels!”

“No need to say any more. You may go.”

Wang Ding withdrew. The premier at once directed his officer of the day to summon the Chancellor of Military Affairs to an urgent conference on a military matter of the utmost importance. Shortly thereafter, Tong Guan, the Chancellor, accompanied by three marshals, arrived at the hall of state and presented themselves to the premier. Cai Jing told them in detail of the emergency in the Northern Capital.

“We need a plan, and a first-rate general, to drive off the marauding bandits and preserve the city,” he said.

The assembled officers looked at one another with frightened expressions. From behind the infantry marshal a man stepped forward. A commander of the palace guards, his name was Xuan Zan. His face was as black as the bottom of pot, his nostrils were aimed at the sky, he had curly hair and a reddish beard. A massive fellow, he wielded a steel blade. His skill with weapons was out of the ordinary. Formerly married to the daughter of a prince, he had been known as the Ugly Son-in-Law. The prince, impressed by his winning several archery matches in a row, had given him his daughter in marriage. But Xuan Zan's ugliness had so revolted the girl that she died.

As a result he was held in low esteem and never rose above his rank of guards' commander. Tong Guan, a wily sycophant and courtier, considered himself infinitely superior, and treated him with contempt.

But at this moment Xuan Zan felt he had to speak, and he addressed the premier.

“I became friends with a man when I was in the rural areas. He is a direct descendant of Guan Yu, famed general at the end of the Han Dynasty, when the country split into three. His name is Guan Sheng, and he bears a striking resemblance to his noble ancestor. His weapon is a crescent-shaped halberd, and so people call him Guan Sheng the Big Halberd. He's now a, lowly patrol officer in Pudong, but he's studied books of military lore since childhood, is thoroughly versed in weaponry, and is a man. Of matchless valor. If he is presented with money and raised to senior officer rank, he can expunge the water-girt fortress and destroy the wild rebels. This man is essential to the preservation of our country and peace in our land. He awaits only your command.”

Cai Jing was delighted. He appointed Xuan Zan his emissary to ride like a comet through the night to Pudong with an invitation to Guan Sheng to come to the capital and confer. The assembled officials withdrew.

Xuan Zan immediately set out, accompanied by four or five other horsemen. In less than a day they arrived at the headquarters of the Pudong patrol and dismounted. Guan Sheng was there, discussing the rise and fall of prominent figures in ancient and current times with his friend Hao

Siwen. When he was informed that an emissary had come from the Eastern Capital, he went out with Hao to welcome him. Guan exchanged courtesies with his caller and invited him into the hall and asked him to be seated.

“We haven't seen each other in a long time,” said Guan. “What brings you all this distance today?”

“The Mount Liangshan bandits are attacking the Northern Capital. I've told the premier that you had a strategy for keeping the country tranquil, and a skill capable of destroying all enemy officers and troops. By imperial decree, and on orders of the premier, I bring you these gifts of money and satins and a fine saddle, and request you to set forth. You mustn't refuse, brother. Get your things together and we'll start for the capital.”

Guan Sheng was extremely pleased. “This is Hao Siwen,” he said. “He and I are sworn brothers. His mother dreamed she was entered by the spirit of a wild dog shortly before she became pregnant with Hao. And so, today, he is known as Wild Dog Hao. He's skilled in all eighteen of the military arts. Since I've been summoned by the premier, why shouldn't I take him with me, so that we can serve the country together?” Xuan Zan gladly consented. He urged them to commence the journey quickly.

Guan Sheng gave parting instructions to his family, collected his weapons, horse, helmet, armor and luggage, and set out that same night with Hao and a dozen big fellows from West of the Pass, all accompanying Xuan Zan. On reaching the Eastern Capital, they rode directly to the premier's residency and dismounted. The keeper of the gate announced them and they were invited in. Xuan Zan led Guan Sheng and Hao Siwen to the hall of state. They kowtowed to the premier, then stood respectfully at the foot of the dais.

Premier Cai Jing looked Guan Sheng over. He saw a tall, powerfully built man with a fine beard divided into three strands, eyebrows that extended to his sideburns, eyes turned up at the corners, a face as ruddy as jujubes, and crimson lips. Cai was very pleased.

“How old are you, officer?” he asked.

“Thirty-two, sir.”

“Bandits from Liangshan Marsh have surrounded the Northern Capital. Tell me, please, do you have any good plan for breaking the siege?”

“I heard a long time ago that those bandits have taken over the Marsh and prey on the people and raid the towns. Now they've dared to leave their lair and seek their own destruction. It would be a waste of energy merely to relieve the Northern Capital. If you will give me an army of crack troops, I'll first take Mount Liangshan, then capture the bandits. Thus, neither of their forces will be able to help the other.”

Cai Jing was delighted. “Besieging the kingdom of Wei to relieve the kingdom of Zhao—the strategy used in ancient days! Exactly what I was thinking.” He directed the Council of Military Affairs to muster fifteen thousand crack soldiers from the provinces of Shandong and Hebei, and let Hao Siwen lead the vanguard and Xuan Zan the rear contingent, with Guan Sheng in over-all command. Duan Chang the infantry marshal was given charge of grain and fodder supplies. The premier highly rewarded the three new commanders and set a date at which they were to proceed directly and in force against Liangshan Marsh.

But the dragon's home is the sea; it cannot ride the mist and clouds. The tiger on the unfamiliar plain cannot fully use its teeth and claws. Truly, while gazing longingly at the autumn moon one can easily lose the glowing jewel in its casket.

What finally befell the forces of Song Jiang? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 64
Huyan Zhuo Deceives Guan Sheng on a Moonlit Night
Song Jiang Captures Suo Chao on a Snowy Day

Guan Sheng took his leave of the premier and assumed command of the fifteen thousand men. He divided them into three contingents and, with them, left the Eastern Capital, heading for Liangshan Marsh.

Meanwhile, Song Jiang and his commanders attacked the Northern Capital every day. Li Cheng and Wen Da dared not come out and confront them. Suo Chao's arrow wound had not yet healed. There was no one to fight.

Song Jiang was unable to crack the city. He grew morose. They had been away from the mountain stronghold for some time, but victory remained elusive. Sitting gloomily in his tent one night, he lit a candle and started to read over the Heavenly Books given him by the Mystic Queen. It struck him as odd that no army had been sent to relieve the long besieged city. And why hadn't Dai Zong, whom he had dispatched to the mountain fortress, returned? Song Jiang's mind was troubled. He could neither eat nor rest.

A junior officer came in and said: “The Military Advisor is here.” Wu Yong entered the central tent.

“We've been surrounding the Northern Capital for quite a while. Why hasn't any army been sent to its rescue?” he queried. “And no one comes out to do battle. We know that three horsemen had left the city. Governor Liang must have dispatched emissaries to the Eastern Capital to report the emergency. Surely Premier Cai, his father-in-law, would send an army under an able general to his rescue. Could they be using the 'besieging Wei to relieve Zhao strategy'? Instead of relieving this place, they could be attacking our Mount Liangshan stronghold. That must be it. You've good cause for worry. We should call in our forces, but not withdraw all.”

Just then Dai Zong the Marvellous Traveller arrived. He reported to Song Jiang. “The premier has engaged the services of Guan Sheng the Big Halberd, direct descendant of the immortalized Guan Yu. He's leading an army in a raid on Mount Liangshan. The chieftains in our fortress don't know what to do. They hope you, brother, and the military advisor will return with our forces quickly and come to their aid.”

“Even so,” cautioned Wu Yong, “we mustn't be too hasty. Tonight, we'll have the infantry withdraw first. But we'll leave two cavalry units in ambush on both sides of Flying-Tiger Valley. When they learn in the city that we're pulling out, they'll certainly chase us. This is the plan we must follow. Otherwise, our army will fall into disorder.”

“You've spoken well, Military Advisor,” said Song Jiang.

He ordered Hua Rong to place five hundred troops in hiding on the left side of the valley, and Lin Chong to conceal another five hundred on the right. Huyan Zhuo he directed to take twenty-five horsemen and Ling Zhen to set up some artillery about a dozen *li* from the city. When the pursuing soldiers came out they were to fire their cannon. This would be the signal for the troops lying in ambush to close in for the kill.

At the same time, Song Jiang's forward contingent would pull back, with dragging banners and muffled drums, like drifting clouds after rain, like retreating troops who refused to fight.

The infantry rose in the middle of the night and began marching away, in order of their units. Not until early the next morning did the bugles sound for a general withdrawal.

All this was observed from atop the city walls—the dragging banners, the shouldered halberds and axes, the obvious intent to return to the mountains, the noisy bustle, the dismantling of the camps. The news was reported to Governor Liang.

“The Liangshan Marsh army has called in its troops. They're all leaving.”

Governor Liang summoned Li Cheng and Wen Da.

“Evidently the premier has sent an army to capture their Mount Liangshan,” said Wen Da, “and the knaves are afraid of losing their lair, so they're rushing to get back. This is our chance to slaughter them and nab Song Jiang.”

Before the words were out of his mouth, a mounted messenger arrived with a directive from the Eastern Capital to join in exterminating the bandits. Pursue them, it said, if they retreat. Governor Liang promptly ordered Li Cheng and Wen Da to lead two contingents and harry Song Jiang's forces from the east and the west.

At the head of the withdrawing units, Song Jiang observed the soldiers pouring out of the city to give chase. He and his men moved quickly, as if their lives depended on it. Li Cheng and Wen Da pursued, straight to the side of Flying-Tiger Valley. Then cannon boomed behind them.

Li Cheng and Wen Da, startled by the blast, reined in their horses and looked. To their rear they saw a bristling array of banners and heard the wild thunder of battle drums. It was completely unexpected. Then five hundred men under Hua Rong, and an equal number under Lin Chong, surged towards them from left and right in a murderous charge.

It was too late to take defensive action. The government commanders knew they had been tricked, and led a full speed retreat. They ran right into a troop of cavalry, under Huyan Zhuo, which slaughtered them savagely. Li Cheng and Wen Da, their helmets gone, their armor in shreds, fled back to the city and bolted the gates.

Song Jiang's troops resumed their orderly withdrawal. As they neared Liangshan Marsh, they found Xuan Zan the Ugly Son-in-Law blocking their road. Song Jiang directed his army to halt and make camp. At the same time he sent a messenger secretly across the river and up the mountain with an order for relief units both by land and by water.

Inside the stronghold, Zhang Heng the Boat Flame, chieftain of the water forces, said to his brother Zhang Shun, White Streak in the Waves: “We haven't performed any meritorious deeds since coming here. Now Guan Sheng the Big Halberd of Pudong is attacking our fortress in three columns. Why don't we two raid his camp, capture him, and cover ourselves with glory? Then we'll be able to hold our heads up before our brothers.”

“Our only job is to command these water forces,” said Zhang Shun. “If we don't relieve a brother unit in danger, people will laugh at us.”

“Don't be so finicky, otherwise we'll never distinguish ourselves. If you don't want to, that's up to you. Tonight, I'm going.”

All Zhang Shun's pleas were to no avail. That night Zhang Heng put four or five men each on more than fifty boats. They were garbed for a stealthy raid, and carried bamboo spears and short daggers. Moonlight shone faintly on the cold dew. It was very still, around the second watch, when the small craft reached the shore.

Guan Sheng was in the central tent, reading by the light of a lamp. A junior officer on sentry duty came in quietly and reported: “Forty or fifty small boats have entered the reeds. The men on them are armed with spears. They're hiding there on both sides. We don't know what they're up to.”

Guan Sheng smiled coldly. He turned to the commanding officer and whispered a few words.

Zhang Heng, leading between two and three hundred men, advanced on tiptoe from the reeds to the edge of camp. They pushed aside the pronged barriers, and continued directly to the center of headquarters. They saw in a tent Guan Sheng stroking his beard as he read beside a lamp.

Happily, Zhang Heng charged into the tent, spear in hand. At once gongs crashed and soldiers yelled, raising a terrible din. It sounded as if heaven and earth were falling, mountains and rivers collapsing. From four sides the soldiers in ambush spewed forth. Not one of the three hundred or so raiders got away. They were bound and pushed before the general's tent.

Guan Sheng looked them over and laughed. “Lawless rebels, petty scoundrels! Dare you come here and insult me?” He had Zhang Heng confined in a prisoner's cart. As to the others, he put them in jail, intending to deliver the lot to the capital after he had captured Song Jiang.

At this time the three Ruan brothers, in the fort by the waterside, were considering sending to Song Jiang for instructions. Zhang Shun came in.

“Although I begged him not to,” he said, “my brother raided Guan Sheng's camp. He was caught and put in a prisoner's cart.”

Ruan the Seventh uttered an exclamation. “We're all in this to the death, together through thick and thin. He's your flesh and blood brother. How

could you let him be captured? If you don't rescue him, we Ruan brothers will!”

“I don't dare make a move without orders,” said Zhang Shun.

“While you're waiting they'll chop him into mincemeat,” cried Seventh.

“That's right,” Second and Fifth agreed.

Zhang Shun couldn't convince them otherwise. He was forced to agree.

That night, at the fourth watch, all the chieftains of the water forces, large and small, were put in command of a hundred or more craft. Rapidly, they set sail for Guan Sheng's camp. To the sentry on the shore they looked like a swarm of ants. As they neared the bank, he hurriedly reported to the Big Halberd.

“Stupid thieving slaves,” laughed Guan Sheng. He again whispered instructions to his commanders.

With the three Ruan brothers in the lead and Zhang Shun bringing up the rear, the yelling raiders charged into the camp. But not an enemy was in sight. Startled, the Ruan brothers turned to leave. Gongs crashed before the tents. From left and right government infantry and cavalry, in eight columns, closed in like giant scoops and dustpans.

Quickly alert to the danger, Zhang Shun dived into the water. The three Ruan brothers rushed along the path for the shore. Their pursuers caught up, and hooked poles snaked out and nooses flew, catching the Devil Incarnate Ruan the Seventh and dragging him away. Second, Fifth and Zhang Shun were rescued by Turbulent River Dragon Li Jun, Tong Wei and Tong Meng at the risk of their own lives.

The naval forces informed Mount Liangshan what had happened. Liu Tang told Zhang Shun to go by water directly to Song Jiang's camp and report. Song Jing conferred with Wu Yong. How were they to drive back Guan Sheng?

“The coming battle will be decisive. On it victory or defeat will depend,” said Wu Yong.

Before the words were out of his mouth, they heard battle drums thundering. Xuan Zan the Ugly Son-in-Law was leading his three contingents in a frontal assault. Song Jiang and his forces advanced to meet them. Xuan Zan appeared beneath an arch of pennants and reined in his horse.

“Who will go forth and seize that rogue?” cried Song Jiang.

Hua Rong promptly clapped his steed and attacked, holding his lance. Xuan Zan met him with whirling blade. Back and forth they fought, up and down the field, for ten full rounds. Hua Rong executed a feint, turned his mount and rode away. Xuan Zan pursued and began to catch up. Hua Rong set his steel lance in the rings of his saddle and took out his bow and arrow. Twisting around, he extended his powerful arms and released the feathered shaft. Xuan Zan heard the twang of the bow and, as the arrow sped towards him, raised his weapon. It pinged off the blade.

Hua Rong notched a second arrow to his string. His foe was closer now. He aimed at his chest and let fly. Xuan Zan ducked low over his stirrups, and the missile whizzed past. But the Ugly Son-in-Law was thoroughly impressed with his marksmanship. Abandoning the chase, he pulled his steed around and galloped back towards his position. Hua Rong wheeled his horse and pursued. As he narrowed the gap between them, Hua Rong winged a third arrow at Xuan Zan's back. It clanged against protective armor and bounced off.

Xuan Zan raced to his position and sent a messenger to Guan Sheng to report what had happened. The Big Halberd immediately called for his battle charger. He grasped his sword, mounted, and rode to the front, emerging beneath the arch of pennants.

Song Jiang commented quietly to Wu Yong on Guan Sheng's noble appearance. Turning to his chieftains, he said: “A heroic general, worthy of his fame!”

Lin Chong was angered by this remark. He said: “We brothers have fought sixty or seventy engagements since coming to Liangshan Marsh, and always with honor. Such a comparison reflects on our prestige!” He rode out at Guan Sheng, lance extended.

The Big Halberd shouted: “Swamp bandits, how dare you rebel against the imperial court! I challenge Song Jiang alone to a battle to the death!”

Song Jiang, from beneath his side's arch of pennants called Lin Chong to stop, and himself rode forth. He bowed to Guan Sheng.

“I am Song Jiang, a petty functionary from the town of Yuncheng,” he said. “I respectfully present myself so that the general may criticise my shortcomings.”

“A small official like you—how dare you rebel against the throne?”

“His Majesty has been deluded. He's given power to corrupt ministers and officials who harm the people. My brothers and I seek only to perform righteous deeds for Heaven and emperor. We have no evil intent.”

“The emperor's soldiers are here before you, and you still resist! Your smooth talk can fool no one. Dismount and surrender, or I'll pound you to mincemeat!”

Qin Ming the Thunderbolt was infuriated. Brandishing his wolf-toothed cudgel, he sprang into the saddle and rushed forward. The Big Halberd galloped out to meet him. Lin Chong, afraid he would lose a chance to distinguish himself in combat, also flew to attack Guan Sheng. The three battled savagely in a cloud of dust like revolving figures on a carrousel lantern.

Song Jiang was concerned lest they injure Guan Sheng. He ordered the buglers to blow recall. Lin Chong and Qin Ming returned to the position.

“We were about to grab the lout,” they said. “Why did you call us back and halt the battle?”

“Brothers,” said Song Jiang, “we fight in righteous self-defense. We never use our strength against the weak. If it took two of you to capture him, he wouldn't acknowledge it as a fair defeat, and people would laugh at us. I consider him a courageous general, an able, loyal statesman, a descendant of an immortalized ancestor. If he would consent to go up the mountain, I'd gladly relinquish my place to him.”

The two chieftains were very dissatisfied. That day, both sides withdrew their forces.

Guan Sheng, returning to his camp, dismounted and removed his armor. “I couldn't hold out against those two commanders. It was plain I was about to lose,” he mused. “But Song Jiang called them back. I wonder why?” He directed that Zhang Heng and Ruan the Seventh be brought to him in their prisoner carts, and he questioned them:

“Song Jiang was only a petty functionary in Yuncheng. Why do you fellows support him?”

“Our brother is famed throughout Shandong and Hebei,” Ruan the Seventh retorted. “He's called the Timely Rain and the Defender of Chivalry. A crude oaf like you wouldn't know that!”

Guan Sheng, with lowered head, did not reply. He ordered that the carts be taken away.

He brooded in his tent that night, unable to sleep or rest. He walked out and gazed at the moonlit sky. Frost covered the ground. Guan Sheng sighed. A scout approached him and reported.

“A bearded commander, riding alone and carrying only a whip, wishes to see you.”

“Did you ask him who he is?”

“He bears no armor or weapons. He won't give his name. He says only that he wants to speak to the commander-in-chief.”

“Very well. Bring him to me.”

The man was escorted to Guan Sheng's tent. He looked vaguely familiar in the lamplight. Guan Sheng asked him who he was.

“Please dismiss your attendants.”

Guan Sheng laughed. “If a general of a great army isn't of one heart and mind with his troops, how can he command them? In headquarters or out, high rank or low, we all know how to keep secrets. You can speak freely.”

“My name is Huyan Zhuo. I was formerly the commander of the imperial linked-up cavalry which attacked Liangshan Marsh. But I was deceived by a bandit trick and lost the initiative. I was unable to return and report to the emperor. When I heard that you had come, General, I was overjoyed. On the battlefield this morning Song Jiang saw that Lin Chong and Qin Ming were about to capture you, and he called them back before they could do you an injury. He's long had the desire to surrender, but his bandits don't agree. He and I have conferred secretly on a way to compel them. If you are willing, General, tomorrow night take a light bow and short arrows, ride a swift horse along a small path into the bandits' camp, and seize Lin Chong and other brigand chieftains. Then you can turn them over to the authorities in the capital. Not only will you be performing a great deed, but Song Jiang and I will have our crimes forgiven.”

Very pleased, Guan Sheng invited Huyan Zhuo to drink. Huyan told him that Song Jiang's main concern was loyalty to the emperor, and that it was unfortunate he had become involved with brigands. Guan Sheng stroked his beard and poured wine. The two spoke freely and without suspicion.

The next day, Song Jiang again mustered his forces to do battle.

Guan Sheng said to Huyan Zhuo: “Tonight, we'll put our plan into operation. But first we must defeat some of their top commanders.”

Huyan donned some borrowed armor, mounted, and rode with the Big Halberd to the field of battle. The moment he set eyes on him, Song Jiang

cried: “I never gave you an iota less than your due. Why did you steal away in the night?”

“Knavish bandits,” Huyan replied. “You'll never amount to anything!”

Song Jiang ordered Huang Xin the Suppressor of the Three Mountains to fight him. Grasping his death-dealing sword, Huang vaulted into the saddle and rode against Huyan. The chargers met and the contestants battled. They had fought less than ten rounds when Huyan raised one of his rods and knocked Huang to the ground. Song Jiang's men rushed onto the field and carried Huang back. Delighted, Guan Sheng commanded all three contingents to attack and annihilate the foe.

“Don't do that,” Huyan urged. “That knave Wu Yong is sure to have some scheme. If we pursue, we'll fall into their trap.”

Guan Sheng immediately recalled his troops, and they returned to camp. In the central tent, he treated Huyan to wine and asked about Huang Xin the Suppressor of the Three Mountains.

“He originally was an important official in the imperial court and a district commander in Qingzhou Prefecture. He and Qin Ming and Hua Rong became brigands at the same time. Killing that bandit today has taken the edge off their prestige. When we slip into their camp tonight we're sure to succeed.”

Guan Sheng was very pleased. He ordered that Xuan Zan and Hao Siwen head two columns as reinforcements. He himself would command a unit of five hundred cavalry armed with light bows and short arrows. Huyan Zhuo would lead the way. They would set out at the second watch, and by the third reach the middle of Song Jiang's camp.

At the boom of a signal cannon they would attack simultaneously from within and without.

The moonlight was as bright as day. At dusk they had put on their armor and removed the bells from their horses' bridles. The soldiers were equipped for stealthy action. When they mounted, each man gripped a short

stick in his teeth to ensure silence. Huyan led the way and the others followed.

For half a watch they travelled a mountain path. Forty or fifty soldiers who had been lying in concealment rose up by the side of the road. “Is that you, General Huyan?” a low voice asked.

“No talking,” Huyan snapped. “Follow behind my horse.”

He rode on ahead, with Guan Sheng in his rear. They proceeded through a mountain gap. Huyan pointed with his lance. A red lamp glowed in the distance.

Guan Sheng reined in his steed. “What place is that?”

“Song Jiang's central army.” Huyan urged on his horse.

As they neared the red lamp a cannon boomed. Guan Sheng and his cavalry charged. But when they reached the lamp, there wasn't a soul in sight, and Huyan had disappeared. Guan Sheng, startled, realized he had been tricked. Hastily, he pulled his mount around. On the surrounding hills, drums pounded and gongs crashed. Scrambling for any escape path, the soldiers fled for their lives. Guan Sheng galloped away, followed only by a few other riders.

They hurried through the mountain gap. On the edge of the grove behind them again a cannon boomed. Hooked poles shot out from every side and dragged Guan Sheng from his saddle. His weapon and horse were taken, he was stripped of his armor, and pushed and jostled into the main camp. Lin Chong and Hua Rong and a troop of horsemen cut off Hao Siwen. Attacked by the two chieftains, Hao fought them twenty or thirty rounds. He felt his strength ebbing and turned to flee. From obliquely behind him the girl warrior Ten Feet of Steel hotly pursued. She snared him with a crimson noose and dragged him from his steed. Brigand infantry rushed forward, grabbed him, and hauled him to the main camp.

In the meanwhile, Qin Ming and Sun Li, out after Xuan Zan with a troop of cavalry, ran into him on the road.

Xuan Zan rode forward. “Wretched bandits,” he fumed. “Who resists me dies, who avoids me lives!”

Qin Ming was furious. He spurred his mount forward, brandishing his wolf-toothed cudgel, riding full tilt towards Xuan Zan. The chargers met and the contestants battled several rounds. Then Sun Li began closing in from the side. Xuan Zan grew flurried, he lost his old skill. He was knocked from his saddle by Qin Ming's cudgel. The three brigand contingents cheered. They rushed over and seized him.

While all this was going on, Li Ying the Heaven Soaring Eagle was raiding Guan Sheng's camp with a large force and rescuing Zhang Heng, Ruan the Seventh and the other captured naval brigands. They also seized a quantity of grain, fodder and horses, and induced many of the defeated foe to surrender.

At dawn Song Jiang and his forces returned to the mountain. The east was gradually turning light when he and his chieftains seated themselves according to rank in Loyalty Hall. Guan Sheng, Xuan Zan and Hao Siwen were brought in. Song Jiang hastily came down, ordered the guards back and personally untied them. He seated Guan Sheng in the central chair of the highest leader and kowtowed.

“This lowly criminal has accidentally offended against Your Excellency's authority,” he said humbly. “I beg forgiveness.”

Huyan Zhuo also came forward. “I was acting under orders and could not refuse. I pray you, General, excuse my presumptuous behavior.”

Guan Sheng was nonplussed by the chivalrous attitude of the chieftains. He turned to Xuan Zan and Hao Siwen. “We're here as captives. What shall we do?”

The two replied: “Whatever you decide, General.”

“We've no face to return to the capital,” said Guan Sheng. “We ask only an early death.”

“Why talk like that?” said Song Jiang. “If you don't scorn us as too insignificant, why not join us in performing righteous deeds on Heaven's behalf? Of course, if you'd rather not, we won't keep you. We'll send you back to the capital today.”

“People call you Song Jiang the Loyal and Righteous, and you're certainly worthy of your name,, A man must requite the friend who understands him. Since we can no longer return home or to our posts, we'll gladly serve as ordinary soldiers under your command.”

Song Jiang was delighted. He had a big feast of celebration laid that day, and sent men out to assure the scattered government troops of good treatment if they surrendered. Six or seven thousand responded. The remainder were allowed to go. Of the soldiers who capitulated, those who had families were given some silver and permitted to return home. Xue Yong, dispatched with a letter to Pudong, was instructed to fetch Guan Sheng's family to the stronghold. Of that we'll say no more.

During the feast, Song Jiang suddenly remembered Lu Junyi the Magnate and Shi Xiu, still incarcerated in the Northern Capital, and tears came to his eyes.

“Don't feel badly,” said Wu Yong. “I have a plan. Muster our troops and attack Darning tonight. We're sure to succeed.”

Guan Sheng rose and said: “As thanks for your not having killed me, I would like to march in the forward echelon.”

Song Jiang was very pleased. The next morning he instructed that Xuan Zan and Hao Siwen's original troops be restored to them and that they serve as the forward unit's vanguard. Not one of the captured commanders was unwilling to join in the attack on the Northern Capital. Li Jun and Zhang Shun were directed to follow up with armored naval forces. All set forth in the order prescribed.

In the city Governor Liang was drinking with Suo Chao to celebrate his recovery from his wound. The sky was dull, and the wind howled. A cavalry scout entered and reported.

“Guan Sheng, Xuan Zan and Hao Siwen and their men have been captured by Song Jiang, and have joined his band. The Liangshan Marsh army will reach here today.”

Governor Liang goggled, his mouth agape. Goblets toppled, chopsticks fell.

“Those bandits gave me an arrow wound,” said Suo Chao. “Now I can get my revenge!”

Liang rewarded him with warm wine and directed him to lead city soldiers against the foe. He ordered Li Cheng and Wen Da to follow with reinforcements.

It was mid-winter and the weather was cold. For days the sky had been overcast with red clouds. A strong wind howled and moaned. Suo Chao marched to Flying-Tiger Valley and made camp.

The next day Song Jiang, with Lu Fang and Guo Sheng, mounted a bluff to watch Guan Sheng fight. Three times the big drums sounded, and Guan Sheng rode onto the field. At the opposite end Suo Chao appeared on horseback. He didn't recognize Guan Sheng.

An aide said: “That's Guan Sheng the Big Halberd who's just gone over to the rebels.”

Suo Chao silently gripped his lance and rode at his opponent. Guan Sheng clapped his horse and galloped to meet him, brandishing his sword. The two had fought less than ten rounds when Li Cheng intervened. He had been watching from the government's central contingent and saw that Suo Chao's play with axes could never defeat Guan Sheng. Flourishing his blade, he joined in the assault.

Xuan Zan and Hao Siwen moved in with their weapons to help the Big Halberd. Now five horsemen were involved. Song Jiang on the bluff

pointed with his whip. His entire army rolled into action. Li Cheng's soldiers suffered a crushing defeat. Severely mauled, they retreated into the city that night and barred the gates. Song Jiang's troops chased them to the foot of the walls, then made camp nearby.

The next day Suo Chao again surged out with a contingent of government soldiers. Wu Yong instructed his field officers to go through the motions of putting up a fight, but to retreat if the enemy advanced. Suo Chao, fooled by this display, returned to the city triumphant.

In the evening the clouds massed and the wind was fierce. When Wu Yong came out of his tent, it was snowing heavily. He dispatched infantry to a narrow stretch between a stream and a hillside and had them dig a pit, cover it over and conceal it with earth. That night the snow continued to fall. The next morning everything was covered with a white mantle two feet thick.

To the watchers on the city wall Song Jiang's forces looked frightened. They seemed to keep shifting from one position to another. Suo Chao, seeing this, mustered three hundred cavalry and sallied forth.

The outlaws scattered and withdrew. Song Jiang directed naval chieftains Li Jun and Zhang Shun to go lightly armed towards the foe. Restraining their mounts, lances athwart, when they neared Suo Chao they cast their weapons aside and fled in the direction of the pit, with Suo Chao in hot pursuit. An impatient man, he threw caution to the winds.

Here the path ran close to the stream. Li Jun abandoned his steed and leaped into the water. He swam forward. “Brother Song Jiang, run!” he yelled.

Suo Chao galloped recklessly across the narrow stretch. On the hillside behind a cannon boomed, and startled horse and rider tumbled into the trap. Brigands who had been hiding immediately swarmed around. Even if Suo Chao had three heads and six arms he couldn't have warded off the seven injuries and eight wounds inflicted upon him.

Truly, deep silvery snow concealed a snare, beneath ivory jade flakes a pit trap lay.

What was in store for Suo Chao the Urgent Vanguard? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 65
Tower-Shifting Heavenly King Appears in a Dream as a Spirit
On the Water White Streak in the Waves Gets His Revenge

Suo Chao was seized. The remainder of his cavalry fled back to the city and reported that he had been captured. Governor Liang was panic stricken. He ordered his commanders to defend the city, but not go forth to give battle. He considered executing Lu Junyi and Shi Xiu, but was afraid of angering Song Jiang. The capital could not rush support troops to him in an emergency and he might only get into deeper trouble. He therefore kept the two in prison and sent a dispatch to the capital that he was awaiting instructions from the premier.

Song Jiang returned to camp and seated himself in his central army tent. The outlaws who had caught Suo Chao brought him before Song Jiang's standard. Very pleased, Song Jiang ordered his men back, and personally untied the prisoner. He invited him into the tent and served him wine.

“Take a look at my brother chieftains here. More than half were once imperial military officers,” he said comfortingly. “Because the emperor has been deluded and permits corrupt officials to hold power and harm the people, they have all volunteered to help me act on Heaven's behalf. If you don't scorn us, General, join our cause of righteous loyalty.”

Yang Zhi came forward and paid his respects. He told Suo Chao what had happened since they parted. Clasping hands, they wept. The situation being what it was, Suo Chao had no choice but to submit. Song Jiang was pleased. That night, they drank in the tent in celebration.

The next morning they discussed how to take the city. But assaults several days in a row produced no results. Song Jiang was depressed. As he sat alone in his tent that night, a strange wind suddenly rose, reducing the lamp flame to the size of a pea. A figure appeared in the shadows. Song Jiang

raised his head and looked. Chao Gai the Heavenly King was standing hesitantly in the entrance way.

“Brother,” he said to Song Jiang, “you still haven't gone back. What are you waiting for?”

Song Jiang was astounded. He quickly got up and asked: “Where have you come from, brother? I still haven't avenged your wrongful death, and I'm uneasy about it day and night. Nor have I performed the sacrificial rites. And so your spirit appears, to berate me.”

“It isn't that,” Chao Gai replied. “Step back a bit, brother. Your life aroma stifles me. I don't dare draw any closer. I have come especially to tell you this: You're due for a hundred days of blood aura calamity. Only an earthly fiend star south of the Yangzi can cure you. The best thing you can do is call in your troops, quickly.”

Song Jiang sought clarification. He pressed forward and said: “You come as a spirit from the Nether World, brother. Tell me the whole truth.”

But Chao Gai gave him a push, and he suddenly wakened, as if from a dream. He shouted for a junior officer to invite the Military Advisor. Wu Yong soon arrived. Song Jiang told him the strange thing that had transpired, and asked him to interpret the dream.

“So Chao the Heavenly King appeared as a spirit. That's something you can't ignore,” said Wu Yong. “The weather is cold and the ground is frozen. Our forces can't stay here much longer. It would be better to return to the stronghold for the winter. When spring comes and the snow melts we can attack the city again. It will be time enough, then.”

“What you say is correct. But Lu the Magnate and brother Shi Xiu are still languishing in jail. Every day must seem like a year, while they wait for us to rescue them. If we go back now, I'm afraid those scoundrels will kill them. It's a bad situation whether we stay or leave.”

No decision was reached.

The next day Song Jiang was dispirited and weary, he ached all over, his head felt as if it was split by an ax, his body burned with fever. He lay down and couldn't get up. The chieftains all came in to see him.

“My back is hot and painful,” he said.

They looked and found a red swelling as big as a griddle.

“It's either an ulcer or a carbuncle,” Wu Yong proclaimed. “I read a medical book once that said green bean powder protects the heart and prevents poisons from entering. We'd better buy some and feed it to brother. If only we could get a doctor! But we'll never find one here, with a war going on.”

White Streak in the Waves Zhang Shun thought of something. “When I lived on the Xunyang River my mother developed a backache, but no medicine seemed to help,” he said. “Finally, we called in An Daoquan, a doctor of Jiankang District, and he cured her immediately. I later sent him some silver. Now, brother is so ill. That doctor is the only one who can treat him. Though the road is far and one can't travel very quickly, I'll hurry day and night and bring him here as fast as I can.”

“In brother's dream Chao Gai told him he would have a hundred days of disaster, and that only an earthly fiend star south of the Yangzi could cure him. Could that man be the one?” Wu Yong wondered.

“If you know such a person, bring him to me, swiftly,” Song Jiang begged. “Never mind the difficulties. This is the time to show your fraternal devotion. Travel day and night and fetch him. Save my life!”

Wu Yong gave Zhang Shun a hundred ounces of gold in leekstrip form to present to the doctor, plus thirty ounces of silver for travel expenses, and said: “Leave today. Come what may, bring him. Let nothing delay you. We're pulling up camp and returning to the fortress. Bring the doctor there. Be as quick as you can.”

Zhang Shun said goodbye, shouldered his pack and set forth.

Wu Yong notified the chieftains to call in the troops and return to the stronghold. Song Jiang was transported on a cart. They left that same night. Having been caught in one ambush, the defenders in the Northern Capital guessed this was another trick, and didn't venture out.

Governor Liang, on hearing news of the departure, was at a loss.

Li Cheng and Wen Da said: “That knave Wu Yong is full of crafty schemes. We'd better remain here on the defensive, and not go after them.”

As to Zhang Shun, he travelled day and night in his hurry to save Song Jiang. It was then the end of winter, and when it didn't rain it snowed. The road was hard going. But Zhang Shun pushed on, regardless.

When he reached the shore of the Yangzi, not a ferry boat was in sight. Zhang Shun groaned, but continued skirting the banks. Finally, he saw cookfire smoke rising from a cove of withered reeds.

“Boatman,” he called, “bring your ferry and take me across.”

The reeds rustled and a figure emerged. He was wearing a conical straw hat and a coir raincape. “Where do you wish to go?” he asked.

“I've urgent business in Jiankang. I'll pay you extra if you ferry me over.”

“That's no problem. But it's late. When you get to the other side you won't find any place to sleep. You'd better rest on my boat. At the fourth watch, when the wind has died and the moon is bright, I'll take you across. You'll have to pay me a little more.”

“What you say makes sense.”

With the boatman, Zhang Shun entered the reeds. A small boat was moored to the bank. Beneath its canopy a thin youth huddled beside a fire. The boatman helped Zhang Shun aboard. Zhang went into the cabin, removed his wet clothes, and asked the youth to dry them over the fire. He opened his bundle, took out a quilt, wrapped himself in it, and lay down.

“Can you get any wine around here?” he called to the boatman. “It would be fine if you could buy some.”

“There's no place that sells wine, but if you want rice I can give you a bowl.”

Zhang Shun finished the rice, lay down and slept. For one thing he was weary from days of continuous travel, for another he was very careless. By the first watch he was sound asleep.

The thin youth who was warming his hands over the charcoal embers pointed pursed lips towards Zhang Shun. “Big brother,” he said to the boatman, “have you had a look?”

The boatman circled around to the bundle on which Zhang's head was resting. He squeezed and felt hard metallic objects. He gestured with his hand. “Untie the boat. We'll do him in when we get to the middle of the river.”

Parting the reeds, the youth leaped to the bank, loosed the mooring rope, jumped back aboard, and shoved off with a bamboo pole. Then he plied a creaking sweep oar and propelled the small craft to the river's center.

Softly the boatman bound Zhang Shun with ropes in the cabin, and brought out a cleaver from beneath the deck. Just then Zhang awoke and found his hands tied. He couldn't move. The boatman pressed him down and raised the big knife.

“Spare me, bold fellow, and I'll give you all my money!”

“I want your gold and silver, and I want your life as well!”

“Let me die in one piece and my ghost won't come back to haunt you!”

The boatman put down the cleaver and tossed Zhang Shun into the river. He opened the bundle and found a large amount of gold and silver. Frowning thoughtfully, he called the thin youth.

“Come here,” he said. “I want to speak to you.”

The youth entered the cabin. The boatman seized him with one hand and hacked him cruelly with the cleaver, bringing him to a sorry end. Then he pushed the body into the water, wiped up the blood-stains and rowed on.

Zhang Shun could stay under water for days. When he was thrown in, he sank down and gnawed open the ropes, then swam to the south bank. He saw a lamp gleaming in grove of trees. He climbed the bank and, dripping wet, entered the grove. Ahead was a rustic tavern. The proprietor had got up in the middle of the night and was pressing wine. The light of his lamp shone through a crack in the wall.

Pushing open the door, Zhang Shun saw an old man. He promptly kowtowed.

“Were you robbed on the river?” the old fellow asked. “And did you save your life by jumping into the water?”

“I wouldn't fool you, grandpa. I was on my way from Shandong to Jiankang on business and it was late. I found a ferry, but the two bad men on it robbed me of my clothes and money and threw me in. I'm a good swimmer, so I managed to escape. Grandpa, please help me.”

The old man conducted him to the rear of the house, gave him a quilted coat, dried his wet clothes over the fire, and heated some wine for him to drink.

“What's your name?” he asked. “What's a Shandong man doing in these parts?”

“My family name is Zhang. Dr. An of Jiankang District is a close friend of mine. I've come to see him.”

“In Shandong you must have passed Liangshan Marsh?”

“I went right by there.”

“Song Jiang, the leader on that mountain, doesn't rob travellers or harm the people. He does only meritorious deeds on Heaven's behalf.”

“He's loyal and righteous. He never attacks good persons, only corrupt officials.”

“I've heard his band is truly righteous. They succor the poor and old, not like the knavish bandits we have here! Our people would be happy if he came. Then we wouldn't have to take any more abuse from crooked overlords.”

“Don't be alarmed, grandpa, but I'm Zhang Shun the White Streak in the Waves. Brother Song Jiang has developed a carbuncle on his back, and I was sent with a hundred ounces of gold to invite Dr. An. But I was careless and fell asleep on the boat and those two scoundrels tied my hands and threw me in the river. I gnawed the ropes open and here I am.”

“So you're a bold fellow from Mount Liangshan! I'll call my son. He'll want to meet you.”

A young man shortly emerged from the rear. On seeing Zhang Shun, he bowed and said: “I've long known of your fame, brother, but never had the chance to meet you. My family name is Wang, and I'm the sixth in our line. Because my movements are swift, I'm called Lightning Wang Dingliu. I've always liked swimming and jousting with staves, but could never find a teacher who would accept me. I've been spending my days selling wine here on the banks of the river. I know those two who robbed you. One is Zhang Wang the River Blockade Demon. The thin young fellow, who is from Huating County, is called Oily Mudfish Sun the Fifth. Those villains are always robbing people on the river. Don't worry, brother. Stay here a few days. When the rascals come to drink, I'll avenge you.”

“I appreciate your good intentions. But I'm very anxious about brother Song Jiang. I only wish I could fly back to the fortress in a single day! I must enter the city as soon as it's daylight and request Dr. An to go with me.”

Wang Dingliu gave his own clothes to Zhang Shun, and feted him with chicken and wine. Of that, no more need be said.

The next morning the sky cleared and the snow vanished. Zhang Shun was given a dozen ounces of silver and escorted into Jiankang District. He went

directly to the foot of Elm Tree Bridge and found Dr. An selling medicines in the doorway of his shop. Zhang Shun entered and kowtowed.

“It's been years, brother,” the doctor said. “What wind blows you here?”

Zhang Shun followed him inside and related his adventures, from the trouble in Jiangzhou until he went with Song Jiang up the mountain. He said that the outlaw leader had developed a carbuncle on his back, and that he, Zhang, had been dispatched to fetch Dr. An. He apologized for not bringing a fee, but explained that he had been robbed and nearly lost his life on the river.

“I should go immediately, since it's Song Jiang the renowned fighter for righteousness,” said the physician. “But my wife died and I've no one at home. I can't just walk off and leave everything.”

Zhang Shun pleaded with him. “If you won't go, I can't return to the mountain.”

“We'll discuss it again, later.”

Only after much urging did Dr. An finally consent.

An spent a great deal of time with a local prostitute called Clever Pet Li. The doctor doted on her. That evening he took Zhang Shun to eat and drink at her place. Clever Pet hailed the young man respectfully as “brother.”

After four or five cups, An was half drunk. He said to the girl: “I'll spend the night here. Tomorrow morning I'm off with this brother for Shandong. I'll be away from twenty days to a month. I'll come and see you when I get back.”

“I don't want you to go! If you won't listen to me, stay away from my door!”

“My medicine kit is packed and I'm ready to go. I leave tomorrow. Cheer up. I won't be gone long.”

In a childish tantrum the girl threw herself on An's chest. “If you don't listen to me, and go. I'll curse you till the flesh flies from your bones!”

White Streak in the Waves was infuriated by these goings-on. He wanted to swallow Clever Pet down in one gulp.

It was growing dark. An was very drunk by now. He staggered into the girl's room and collapsed on her bed.

“Go home,” Clever Pet said to Zhang Shun. “There's no place for you to sleep here!”

“I'll wait till brother sobers up. We'll leave together.”

Since she couldn't get rid of him, the girl put him in a small room near the front door.

Zhang Shun was burning with impatience. How could he sleep? Around the first watch he heard a knock on the door and peered out through a crack in the wall. He saw a man slip in and speak to the old bawd who tended Clever Pet.

“You haven't been around in a long time,” she said. “Where have you been? Tonight, the doctor's sleeping drunk in her room. What can we do?”

“I've brought her ten ounces of gold. She can have them made into hairpins. You must do something, old mother, to get us together.”

“Wait in my room. I'll call her.”

Zhang Shun recognized the man in the light of the lamp. It was Zhang Wang the River Blockade Demon. He had come to spend on Clever Pet some of the wealth he had recently acquired on the river.

Zhang Shun could scarcely contain his rage. He continued to watch. He saw the old bawd carry food and wine into her room, then fetch Clever Pet. He wanted to dash in after her, but he was afraid he'd mess things up and the robber would get away.

By the third watch the two servants in the kitchen were also drunk. The old bawd, who had been reeling around, sat in an intoxicated stupor beneath the lamp. Zhang Shun softly opened the door of his room and tiptoed to the entry to the kitchen. He saw a gleaming cleaver lying on the oven and the old bawd sprawled in a drunken slumber on a bench with her head to one side.

He crept into the kitchen and picked up the cleaver. First he killed the old bawd. He wanted to destroy the two servants next. But the cleaver had not been sharp to begin with, and hacking the old woman had turned its edge. Then he caught sight of an ax for chopping kindling. He grabbed it. Before the servants could cry out, he finished them both with one blow each.

Clever Pet, hearing the noise, hurriedly opened the door of her room. She found herself confronted by Zhang Shun. He swung the ax and split her chest asunder.

Zhang Wang saw, by the light of the lamp, the girl fall dead. He pushed open the rear window, leaped over the wall, and escaped.

White Streak in the Waves was frantic, but there was nothing he could do about it. Recalling what Wu Song had done under similar circumstances, he tore a strip from the edge of his tunic, dipped it in the blood, and wrote on the wall: “The killer is An Daoquan.” He wrote it in dozens of places.

Around the fifth watch, as dawn was breaking, he heard An wake from his drunken slumber and call Clever Pet.

“Don't shout, brother,” said Zhang Shun. “There's something I want to show you.”

An got up. When he saw the four bodies he was paralyzed with fright. He trembled uncontrollably.

“Brother,” said Zhang Shun, “do you see what's written on the wall?”

“You're ruining me!”

“Only two roads are open to you. Either you raise a rumpus, and I leave, and you pay for the crimes with your life. Or, if you want nothing to come of this, you go home, get your medicine kit, and rush with me to Mount Liangshan and save my brother. Take your choice.”

“You're too reckless!”

When it was daylight, Zhang Shun wrapped some money for travel expenses and escorted An home. The doctor knocked till someone opened the door. He collected his medicine kit and left the city with Zhang Shun. They went directly to Lightning Wang's tavern.

“Yesterday, Zhang Wang passed this way,” the proprietor said. “Unfortunately, I didn't see you anywhere.”

“I met him too, but I didn't take any action. I'm on an important mission. Who has time for petty vengeance!”

Before the words were out of Zhang Shun's mouth, Lightning Wang exclaimed: “Here he comes again!”

“Don't alarm him. See where he goes.”

They watched while Zhang Wang went down to his craft by the shore. Wang Dingliu hailed him.

“Hey, brother Zhang, bring your boat over. Two relatives of mine want to cross.”

“If they want to board my boat, they'll have to hurry.”

Lightning told Zhang Shun.

“Brother An,” Zhang Shun said to the doctor, “you and I must exchange clothes. That way, we can get on board.”

“How?”

“I have an idea. Don't ask.”

The two put on each other's garments. Zhang Shun tied a kerchief around his head, and over this a large conical straw hair which shadowed his face. Lightning carried the medicine kit on his back. They walked down towards the boat.

Zhang Wang brought the craft to the bank and the three men went aboard. Zhang Shun crept to the poop deck and lifted up the boards. The cleaver was still there. He took it and returned to the cabin.

Zhang Wang plied the creaking sweep oar and the vessel glided to the middle of the river. Zhang Shun removed his hat and upper garments.

“Boatman, come quick,” he called. “This cabin has blood stains.”

“Don't joke,” said Zhang Wang.

Not realizing it was a trick, he stuck his head in. Zhang Shun wrapped his arms around the boatman's neck.

“Robber,” he shouted. “Do you recognize the passenger you ferried that snowy night?”

Zhang Wang stared, speechless.

“You duped me out of a hundred ounces of yellow gold and tried to kill me! Where's that thin young man?”

“I didn't feel like sharing the money with him and I was afraid he'd argue. So I killed him and threw his body in the river.”

“You robber! I was born on the banks of the Xunyang and raised at the foot of Little Melon Hill. I sold fish for a living. Everybody knew me! Because I raised a row in Jiangzhou I had to go to Liangshan Marsh and join Song Jiang. We marauded all over. Everybody feared me! You tricked me onto your boat, tied my hands, and threw me in the river. If I wasn't a good swimmer, I'd be dead! We meet today as enemies. I can't forgive you!”

He pulled the boatman into the cabin, trussed his hands behind his back and tied them to his ankles. Then he heaved him into the Yangzi, exclaiming: “I

didn't cut you up, either!”

Lightning Wang sighed as the river robber sank beneath the waves. Zhang Shun found his gold pieces and wrapped them up.

The three men rowed for shore. Zhang Shun said to Wang Dingliu: “I'll never forget your chivalry, brother. If you don't scorn me, perhaps you and your father will dispose of the tavern and come to Mount Liangshan where we can seek righteousness together. What do you say?”

“Nothing would please me better!”

At that, they parted. Zhang Shun and Dr. An changed back into their own clothes and disembarked on the north shore. Lightning Wang bid them farewell and rowed the boat home. He packed his belongings and prepared to catch up.

The other two, carrying the medicine kit, started on their journey. An was a man of letters who had always been a doctor. He wasn't used to walking. After about thirty *li*, he was worn out. Zhang Shun invited him to an inn and bought wine. While they were drinking, a man entered and approached them.

“Why have you been so long, brother?” he exclaimed.

Zhang Shun looked up. It was Dai Zong the Marvellous Traveller, disguised as a merchant. Hurriedly, Zhang introduced him to An, then inquired about Song Jiang.

“He's only semi-conscious and can't eat or drink. He seems to be dying. The crisis will be soon.”

Zhang Shun wept, but An queried: “How is his complexion?”

“Haggard. He groans constantly. The pain never stops. I don't think he can last much longer.”

“If he still feels pain, I can cure him. I'm only afraid I won't reach him in time.”

“That's easy,” said Dai Zong. He affixed two charms to An's legs and shouldered the medicine kit. “You come at your own pace,” he said to Zhang Shun. “I'll go on ahead with the doctor.”

Dai and An left the inn. Using the marvellous travel method, they sped off.

Zhang Shun remained at the inn for another two or three days. Sure enough, Lightning Wang, carrying their luggage, arrived with his father.

Delighted, Zhang Shun said: “I've been waiting for you.”

“Dr. An?” asked Wang.

“Dai Zong the Marvellous Traveller came here to meet me. He's gone off with the doctor.”

Lightning Wang, his father, and Zhang Shun left together for Liangshan Marsh.

Dai and An, using the marvellous travel method, reached Mount Liangshan the same night. Chieftains, big and small, welcomed them and led them to Song Jiang's bedside. He was scarcely breathing.

But Dr. An, after taking his pulse, said: “You needn't worry, chieftains. His pulse is all right. Although his body is depressed, there's nothing very serious. I don't like to boast, but in ten days he'll recover.”

The chieftains all kowtowed. An burned some artemisia over the carbuncle to draw out the poison, then applied a draw poultice externally and gave growth-stimulating medicines internally.

In five days the patient regained his rosy complexion, his flesh became tender, his appetite improved. Before ten days were up, although the wound wasn't completely closed, he was eating and drinking as usual.

Zhang Shun arrived with Lightning Wang and his father. After greeting Song Jiang and the chieftains, he told how he had been robbed and got his revenge, both times on the river.

“You nearly delayed brother Song Jiang's recovery,” said the outlaw leaders with a sigh.

As soon as he was better, Song Jiang conferred with Wu Yong on how to attack the Northern Capital and rescue Lu Junyi the Magnate and Shi Xiu, as was their duty in chivalry. Dr. An had reservations.

“Your wound still isn't fully closed,” he said. “You mustn't be too active. It interferes with the healing process.”

Wu Yong added his own urgings. “Don't concern yourself about this, brother. It will only upset you. Just rest and regain your strength. I have no talents, but now that spring is here I definitely will crack open the Northern Capital, rescue Lu the Magnate and Shi Xiu, and capture the adulterers. We guarantee to avenge you.”

“With you aiding me so solicitously, Military Advisor, though I die, I'll be able to close my eyes.”

Wu Yong issued his orders in Loyalty Hall. And as a result the Northern Capital was turned into a fiery inferno, a forest of spears, and before the governor's residency lay a mountain of corpses, a sea of blood. Truly, his casual remarks caused demons to tremble in fear and gallant commanders to be overwhelmed with admiration.

What was the plan Military Advisor Wu Yong had evolved? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 66
Shi Qian Burns the Jade Cloud Mansion
Wu Yong by a Ruse Takes Darning City

“Fortunately, you're all right now, brother,” Wu Yong said to Song Jiang. “Having Dr. An here treating your illness is a great blessing for our stronghold. While you were confined to bed, I frequently sent scouts into the Northern Capital to nose around. They say Governor Liang has got the jitters. He's afraid we're going to attack. I also had men put up proclamations in all the market places in and around the city assuring the

ordinary people that they would not be harmed. We say that each wrong has its avenger and every debt has its creditor, and promise that when our army enters Darning we'll seek out only certain specific enemies. The result is that Governor Liang is more worried than ever. Premier Cai in the Eastern Capital has heard that Guan Sheng has come over to us, but he doesn't dare mention this in the presence of the emperor. Cai favors giving us amnesty and official posts. He feels that will solve everything. He keeps writing to Governor Liang, urging him to spare the lives of Lu the Magnate and Shi Xiu as a sign of conciliation."

On hearing this, Song Jiang wanted to go down the mountain immediately and attack the Northern Capital. Wu Yong had another idea.

"It's now the lunar New Year and the Lantern Festival Day is rapidly approaching," he said. "It's the custom in the Northern Capital to put on a big display of lanterns. I'd like to take this opportunity to slip some men into the city, first, then attack. Coordinating inside and out, we can break through the defenses."

Song Jiang agreed. "Please work out the details," he said to the brigand commanders.

"The most important thing is to set a blaze inside the city as a signal. Which of you brothers will venture to go in and do it?" Wu Yong queried.

A man walked up to the foot of the platform. "I will!" Everyone looked. It was Shi Qian, known as Flea on a Drum.

"I lived in the Northern Capital as a child," he said. "There's one big tavern called Jade Cloud Mansion. Upstairs and down it has well over a hundred rooms. It's bound to be very lively the night of the Lantern Festival Day. I'll sneak into the city before that, and on the fifteenth of the first lunar month I'll climb to the top of the building and light a signal fire. Then the Military Advisor can dispatch forces to raid the prison. That's the best way."

"Just what I was thinking," said Wu Yong. "Start down the mountain tomorrow at daybreak. At the first watch on Festival night, if you can set a fire on top of the Mansion you'll win a lot of credit."

Shi Qian promised to carry out his mission, and departed.

The next day Wu Yong ordered Xie Zhen and Xie Bao to disguise themselves as hunters and go into the city with presents of game for the officials. When they saw the signal fire on the night of the fifteenth they were to stand in front of the government office and stop any officer or soldier who tried to report it. The two consented and left.

Wu Yong then told Du Qian and Song Wan to assume the garb of rice merchants and push two barrows into the city and find quarters. The moment they saw the signal blaze on the fifteenth they were to seize the city's East Gate. They promised and departed.

He instructed Kong Ming and Kong Liang to disguise themselves as beggars. They were to sleep under the eaves of some building in the busiest section of the city. When they saw the fire on the Mansion, they were to hurry and lend a hand. The two consented and left.

Wu Yong directed Li Ying and Shi Jin to dress as travellers, and to put up at an inn outside the East Gate. On seeing the signal blaze they were to kill the soldiers guarding the gate, take it over, and keep it for a convenient exit. The two promised and departed.

He told Sagacious Lu and Wu Song to move into a temple outside the city in the guise of itinerant monks. At the signal they were to go to the South Gate and block the government troops attempting to charge out. They agreed and left.

Wu Yong ordered Zou Yuan and Zou Run to pretend to be lantern sellers and put up at an inn in the center of the city. When they saw the fire on the roof top they were to go to the front of the prison and support the raiders. The two promised and departed.

He told Liu Tang and Yang Xiong to disguise themselves as policemen and take rooms in front of prefectural headquarters. When they saw the signal fire they were to prevent anyone from going in to report it, and thus cut the connection between the municipal administration's head and its tail. The two consented and departed.

He directed the Taoist Gongsun Sheng to assume the garb of a wandering priest, with Ling Zhen disguised as his acolyte, move into a secluded part of the city with hundreds of fireworks, and set them off when they saw the signal blaze. They agreed and left.

Zhang Shun was to enter the city with Yan Qing through the water gate via the moat and seize the adulterers in the home of Lu the Magnate.

Stumpy Tiger Wang, Sun Xin, Zhang Qing, Ten Feet of Steel Hu, Mistress Gu and Sun the Witch were to be three country couples coming to see the lantern display. They were to set fire to Lu's house.

Chai Jin and Yue Ho, dressed as army officers, would go to the home of Cai the prison superintendent and demand that he guarantee the safety of the two prisoners.

When all these dispositions had been made, the chieftains set out upon their various missions. It was then the beginning of the first lunar month.

We'll speak not of the bold fellows who departed, one by one, down the mountain, but tell instead of Governor Liang, as he summoned Li Cheng, Wen Da, Prefect Wang, and other high officials for a conference.

“Every year we put on a big display of lanterns to celebrate the first full moon, and make merry with the populace just as they do in the Eastern Capital,” said the Governor. “But the Liangshan Marsh bandits have raided us twice, recently. I'm afraid a lantern festival might attract trouble. I'm considering calling it off. How do you gentlemen feel about that?”

“I think the robbers have stealthily withdrawn,” said Wen Da. “Those proclamations of theirs prove that they're at their wits' end. There's nothing else they can do. You needn't let them concern you, Excellency. If we don't have our lantern display this year and those varlets find out about it they're sure to sneer at us. I propose that you issue an edict calling for even more fancy lanterns and celebrations than last year, and construct two hills of lanterns in the center of the city, Follow the example of the Eastern Capital and celebrate the Lantern Festival for five full days, from the thirteenth to the seventeenth, inclusive, with revels all through the night. Have the

prefect check to make sure that everyone takes part. You too must join, Excellency, and celebrate with the people. I'll lead a cavalry unit to Flying-Tiger Valley, and there guard against the bandits pulling any tricks. District Commander Li can patrol with his Iron Cavalry around the outskirts of the city, to ensure that the populace is not disturbed."

Governor Liang was pleased with this suggestion. After he and his officials had discussed and agreed upon it, he had public proclamations issued accordingly.

Darning, known as the Northern Capital, was the largest city in Hebei and a thriving metropolis. Merchants and traders flocked there in droves. When they heard there was to be a lantern festival, all came to take part.

On the streets and in the lanes, local officials daily inspected the preparations. Wealthy families vied with one another in their displays, travelling anywhere from one hundred to three hundred *li* to buy handsome and flowery lanterns. Many vendors brought lanterns to the city annually. Families built special sheds in front of their doors, where they hung up their best lanterns and set off fireworks. Inside the courtyards other sheds were erected. Here, amid beautiful screens and revolving lights, pictures by famous artists graced the walls, and rare antiques and intricate toys were placed on view.

Every household in every street and lane had lanterns ready. Beside the prefectural bridge near the governor's residency an artificial hill had been built. Two paper dragons, one red and the other yellow, coiled around it. Each scale of their bodies was a small lantern, and water spewed from their mouths. Countless lanterns also illuminated both approaches to the bridge.

An artificial hill was erected in front of the Bronze Buddha Monastery. Around this coiled a blue dragon, lit by hundreds of lanterns.

Before the Jade Cloud Mansion was another artificial hill. On it was a white dragon, with innumerable lanterns on all sides. The Mansion was actually a tavern, the finest in the province. Three eaved stories high, with carved beams and decorated pillars, it was an extremely handsome structure of

more than a hundred rooms. From morning till night the Mansion resounded with music and song.

All the temples and monasteries were festooned with lanterns to celebrate a prosperous new year. Needless to say, the displays in the houses of joy and amusement were more lavish still.

Scouts reported the news to Mount Liangshan. Wu Yong was delighted. He informed Song Jiang. Song wanted to lead personally an attack on the Northern Capital. But Dr. An disapproved.

“Your wound isn't entirely closed,” he said. “You mustn't move about too much. If anger seeps in, the cure will be difficult.”

“Let me go in your place,” Wu Yong proposed. He and Ironclad Virtue Pei Xuan then mustered eight contingents.

The first was led by Two Rods Huyan Zhuo, assisted by Han Tao and Peng Qi, with Huang Xin, Suppressor of the Three Mountains, commanding the reserve. This was entirely a cavalry outfit. Actually, Huyan's forward unit was not going to fight. It was a ruse to draw Guan Sheng into battle.

The second contingent had Panther Head Lin Chong leading the forward unit, aided by Ma Lin and Deng Fei, with Hua Rong commanding the reserve. This too was entirely cavalry.

The third contingent, also fully mounted, had Guan Sheng the Big Halberd leading the forward unit, seconded by Xuan Zan and Hao Siwen. Sun Li the Sickly General brought up the rear.

The fourth contingent, again fully cavalry, had Qin Ming the Thunderbolt in command of the forward unit, assisted by Ou Peng and Yan Shun. Yang Zhi the Blue-Faced Beast led the reserve.

Mu Hong the Unrestrained, an infantry commander, was at the head of the fifth contingent. His lieutenants were Du Xing and Zheng Tianshou.

Another infantry commander, Li Kui the Black Whirlwind, headed the sixth contingent, assisted by LiLi and Cao Zheng.

Infantry commander Lei Heng the Winged Tiger, aided by Shi En and Mu Chun, led the seventh contingent.

The eight contingent was led by infantry commander Fan Rui the Demon King Who Roils the World, seconded by Xiang Chong and Li Gun.

The eight companies were ordered to march that same day and to brook no delays. They were to reach the city walls by the second watch of the fifteenth of the first lunar month, infantry and cavalry advancing together.

When the command was given, the eight contingents set forth down the mountain. The other chieftains remained with Song Jiang to guard the fortress.

Now Flea on a Drum Shi Qian was a man who flew along eaves and walked atop walls. He didn't enter the Northern Capital on the regular road but clambered over the city wall at night. Unable to find accommodations at an inn for a single traveller, he wandered the streets all day and at night rested beneath the pedestal of a god in a temple. On the thirteenth he went to the center of town and watched the citizens erecting their sheds and hanging their lanterns.

He saw Xie Zhen and Xie Bao, carrying game, also strolling and looking. He observed too Du Qian and Song Wan coming out of a house of pleasure. Shi Qian went to an upper floor of the Jade Cloud Mansion and walked around. Down in the street again, he met Kong Ming, dirty, his hair dishevelled and wearing a tattered sheepskin coat, begging with a staff in his left hand, a bowl in his right. Kong Ming nudged him to go to the back and talk.

“You don't look a bit like a beggar, brother,” said Shi Qian, “a big robust fellow like you, with a fair skin and rosy complexion! This city is full of policemen. If any of them sees through your disguise, our whole project may be delayed! You'd better stay out of sight.”

While he was speaking, another beggar approached from the edge of a wall. Shi Qian looked at him closely. It was Kong Liang.

“You're another one with a snowy white skin,” said Shi Qian. “Nobody would believe you were starving. They'll surely spot you as a fraud.” Suddenly, two men grabbed them from behind and barked: “A fine thing you three are up to!”

They turned and saw Yang Xiong and Liu Tang. Shi Qian breathed a sigh of relief. “You nearly scared the life out of me!”

“Come with me,” said Yang Xiong. He led them to a secluded spot and said reproachfully: “Don't you have any sense? How could you talk there? It's lucky it's only we two who saw you. If it was one of those sharp-eyed fast-moving policemen, brother Song Jiang's big plan might have to be postponed. We've seen the other brothers. There's no need for you to roam the streets any more.”

“Zou Yuan and Zou Run are out selling lanterns,” said Kong Ming. “Sagacious Lu and Wu Song have put up in a temple outside the city. That's enough talk. Let each man do his job when the time comes.”

In front of a temple they met a Taoist priest coming out. “What are you five doing here?” he-cried. It was Dragon in the Clouds Gongsun Sheng. Behind him was Ling Zhen, disguised as an acolyte. The seven exchanged significant glances, nodded in agreement, and went their separate ways.

With the festival day almost upon them, Governor Liang directed Wen Da the Mighty Sword to lead his mounted, troops out of the city and set up a position in Flying-Dragon Valley to guard against the bandits. On the fourteenth he ordered Li Cheng the Heavenly King to take five hundred Iron Cavalry, in full armor, and patrol the outskirts.

The next day, the fifteenth, the Lantern Festival Day, was clear and bright. At dusk, the moon rose, gilding the avenues and streets with silver. Crowds watched the rockets and admired the beautiful shining lanterns.

That night Superintendent Cai Fu instructed his brother to keep an eye on the prison. “I'm going home for a while. I'll be back soon.”

As he was entering the door of his house, two men moved in after him. The first was dressed as an army officer. The other appeared to be a servant. But when Cai Fu looked at them in the light of a lamp, he saw that the first was Chai Jin the Small Whirlwind and the second Iron Throat Yue Ho. Cai Fu knew Chai Jin, and he invited them in and started to lay out wine cups.

“No wine, thanks,” said the Small Whirlwind. “We've come with an urgent request. We know you've been taking excellent care of Lu the Magnate and Shi Xiu, and for that we can't thank you enough. While all the festivities are going on we'd like to slip into the prison and see them. May we trouble you to lead the way? Please don't refuse.”

Cai Fu was an experienced officer. He could guess pretty well what Chai Jin intended. If he refused and the outlaws succeeded in breaking into the city, not only he but his whole family would be exterminated.

He had no choice but to risk the dangerous consequences. He gave them some old clothes to wear and disguised them as policemen. Then he changed his head kerchief and led them directly to the prison.

Around the first watch Stumpy Tiger, Ten Feet of Steel, Sun Xin, Mistress Gu, Zhang Qing and Sun the Witch, masquerading as three couples from the country, mingled with the crowds entering the city through the East Gate. Gongsun Sheng and Ling Zhen, carrying large hampers on shoulder-poles, went into the Temple of the City God and sat down on the veranda. The temple was next door to the prefectural government office.

Zou Yuan and Zou Run strolled towards the center of town bearing lanterns for sale. Du Qian and Song Wan, each trundling a wheel barrow, proceeded directly to the front of the governor's residency and merged with the revellers there. The residency was on the avenue leading to the East Gate.

Liu Tang and Yang Xiong, each holding a policeman's staff and with a weapon concealed on his person, sat down on either side of the prefectural bridge. Yan Qing and Zhang Shun swam into the Northern Capital beneath

the water gate and concealed themselves in a secluded spot. Of all this we'll say no more.

Soon, the second watch was sounded in the drum tower. Shi Qian appeared with a basket on his arm. In it were sulphur and nitrate and things to ignite them, covered over by velvet ornaments for ladies' hair. He entered Jade Cloud Mansion and walked up the stairs. In every room pipes were tootling, drums and clackers beating, and games being played, as merry-makers noisily celebrated the Festival of the Lanterns. Pretending to be selling his hair ornaments, Shi Qian went from room to room. He met Xie Bao and Xie Zhen in the hallway carrying steel pitchforks from which rabbit game were suspended.

“It's time,” said Shi Qian. “Why isn't there any activity outside?”

“We've just been out front and saw a mounted scout go by,” said Xie Zhen. “Our troops have probably arrived. You just do your job.”

Before the words had left his mouth a clamor arose in front of the building. Someone exclaimed: “The men of Liangshan Marsh are at the West Gate!”

“Hurry,” Xie Zhen said to Shi Qian. “We're going to take our posts outside the government office.”

He and Xie Bao hurried to their destination and found it crowded with defeated soldiers who had fled back to the city. They said: “Wen Da the Mighty Sword lost his position in a surprise raid. The bandits are headed this way!”

Li Cheng, who was patrolling atop the city wall when he heard the news, galloped to garrison headquarters. He mustered more troops, and ordered that the gates be closed and the city defended.

Prefect Wang had led over a hundred policemen, with chains and fetters, to suppress any disturbances. He returned to garrison headquarters hastily on learning of the impending attack. Governor Liang, who had been seated at his ease outside his residency, had not been alarmed when the first news reached him. But when, less than half a watch later, mounted scouts came

flying back like comets, he was shaken to the depths of his soul. He hurriedly called for his horse.

At that moment Shi Qian ignited the sulphur and nitrate on the roof of Jade Cloud Mansion. An enormous flame shot into the sky, paling the moon. Governor Liang hastily mounted and started to ride to the scene. But two big fellows pushed over their wheel barrows, blocking the road, then proceeded to pour oil on them from lamps which had been hanging on the barrows and set them on fire.

Liang headed for the East Gate. Two other big fellows shouted: “Li Ying and Shi Jin are here!” and strode murderously forward, twirling halberds. The guards at the gate fled, but not before a dozen of them had been wounded. Du Qian and Song Wan then joined in, and the four, together, captured the East Gate.

Governor Liang saw he was no match for them. With his retinue he flew to the South Gate. There, he heard voices crying: “A big fat monk with a Buddhist staff and a beast-face pilgrim with a pair of sharp knives are yelling and slaughtering their way in!”

Liang turned his steed and went back to his residency. He saw Xie Zhen and Xie Bao felling men left and right with their steel pitchforks. He thought to go to prefectural headquarters, but dared not draw any closer. Prefect Wang tried to come out to him. Liu Tang and Yang Xiong brought their policemen's staves down on Wang's head with such force that his brains spattered and his eyes bulged, and he fell dead in front of the prefecture. His officers and clerks fled for their lives.

The governor hurriedly rode to the West Gate. The concerted boom of explosives in the City God Temple shook the earth. At the same time Zou Yuan and Zou Run with torches on long bamboo poles began setting fires to the eaves of houses, while Stumpy Tiger and Ten Feet of Steel, in front of the southern brothel section, came fighting forward, aided by Sun Xin and Mistress Gu who had pulled out concealed weapons. Zhang Qing and Sun the Witch barged into the Bronze Buddha Monastery, clambered up the artificial hill and set it ablaze.

All over the city, the people were scurrying in terror. Screams and wails shivered in every household. In a dozen places flames brightened the sky. Confusion reigned.

As Governor Liang was rushing to the West Gate he met Li Cheng and his cavalry, and they all raced to the top of the city wall above the South Gate. Li reined in his steed, mounted the Drum Tower and peered out. Approaching was a huge array of men and horses and a banner inscribed with the words: *General Huyan Zhuo.* The general was a spirited and courageous figure in the firelight. To his left was Han Tao, to his right Peng Qi, while Huang Xin brought up the rear. Spread out like wings of a goose, the ruthlessly advancing contingent was nearly at the gate.

Unable to leave the city, the governor and Li Cheng concealed themselves beneath the archway of the North Gate and watched the brightly leaping flames. They could see a mounted force of unknown number flying towards them. It was led by Panther Head Lin Chong, who held a lance athwart as he urged on his horse. To his left was Ma Lin, to his right Deng Fei. Hua Rong brought up the rear.

Liang went again to the East Gate. Amid an advancing army of torches he could see Mu Hong the Unrestrained, with Du Xing on his left and Zheng Tianshou on his right. These three gallant infantry commanders, halberds in hand, were rapidly closing in on the city with over a thousand men.

Throwing all caution to the winds, the governor dashed through the South Gate. In the light of torches on the side of the drawbridge he could see Li Kui the Black Whirlwind, with LiLi on his left and Cao Zheng on his right. Buff naked, Li Kui swarmed up from the moat, brandishing his axes. LiLi and Cao came with him.

Li Cheng carved a bloody path out of the city to cover the governor's escape. Murderous cries arose on their left. From amid an army of countless torches, Guan Sheng the Big Halberd rode forth. Clapping his spirited roan and waving his blue steel blade, he galloped directly towards Liang.

Li Cheng, grasping his two knives, advanced to meet the foe. But he had no heart for the fight, and soon pulled his horse around and withdrew. From the

left a combined force under Xuan Zan and Hao Siwen, with Sun Li bringing up the rear, charged fiercely. In the ensuing battle, Hua Rong advanced swiftly from behind, fitted an arrow to his bow and brought a lieutenant beside Li Cheng tumbling from his saddle. The startled Li turned and fled.

Before he had gone more that half a bowshot, drums pounded and gongs crashed on his right. In the firelight he saw Qin Ming the Thunderbolt, waving his cudgel on a spirited mount, murderously advancing with Yan Shun and Ou Peng, followed by Yang Zhi. Li Cheng fought as he retreated, still protecting the governor. They managed to break through.

Meanwhile, in the city Du Qian and Song Wan slaughtered the governor's family, old and young, good and bad. Liu Tang and Yang Xiong wiped out the family of Prefect Wang. Kong Ming and Kong Liang had climbed the rear wall of the city prison and were about to go in. Zou Yuan and Zou Run planted themselves at the front of the prison to prevent anyone from entering.

Inside, Chai Jin and Yue Ho recognized the signal fire. “Did you brothers see that?” they called to Cai Fu and Cai Qing. “What are you waiting for?”

Cai Qing was on guard at the door, but Zou Yuan and Zou Run smashed it open and shouted: “The whole band of bold fellows from Liangshan Marsh is here! Bring out Lu the Magnate and Shi Xiu!”

Cai Qing hastily reported to his brother, but by then Kong Ming and Kong Liang had already jumped down from the top of the building. Chai Jin, regardless of whether the Cai brothers were willing or not, pulled out an implement, opened the fetters and released the two prisoners.

“Come with me, quick, to Lu's house and protect his family,” Chai Jin said to Cai the Superintendent.

All rapidly emerged through the prison gate, where they were joined by Zou Yuan and Zou Run, and hurried to the home of Lu Junyi. The Magnate led the five Mount Liangshan men in a search for his wife and his steward Li Gu.

When Li Gu heard that an army of bold fellows from Liangshan Marsh had entered the city and saw the fires rising on all sides, his eyes twitched and he consulted with Lu's wife. They packed some valuables and hurried through the door. But then they heard front gates being knocked down and an unknown number of men rushing in. They turned in fright and stole out through the rear gate. They tiptoed along the wall and headed for the river, hoping to find a place of concealment.

On the bank Zhang Shun shouted: “Where does that woman think she's going!”

Panic-stricken, Li Gu jumped into a boat to hide. As he was about to plunge into the cabin, a hand suddenly reached out and grabbed him, and a voice shouted: “Li Gu, do you remember me?”

The steward recognized the voice of Yan Qing. “Young Prodigy,” he cried, “we've never been enemies! Don't pull me ashore!”

Zhang Shun, on the bank, already had the woman clapped under one arm. He dragged her down to the boat. Yan Qing held on to Li Gu, and all went towards the East Gate.

Lu the Magnate, when he found his wife and steward gone, ordered his servants to pack his gold and silver and precious things, load them on carts and take them to the mountain fortress for distribution.

Chai Jin went with Cai Fu to his house where the superintendent collected his family and belongings. They prepared to leave for the mountain stronghold.

“You must save the ordinary people of the city, Excellency,” said Cai Fu. “Don't let them come to any harm.”

Chai Jin relayed his request to Wu Yong. But though the Military Advisor immediately issued appropriate orders, by then half the population had been killed or wounded.

The sky was already light. Wu Yong and Chai Jin, in the city, had the trumpets blow the call to assemble. The chieftains and Lu the Magnate and Shi Xiu all gathered at the governor's residency. The released prisoners praised Cai Fu and Cai Qing for their kindness and said they owned them their lives. Yan Qing and Zhang Shun brought forward Li Gu and Lu's wife. The Magnate told Yan Qing to keep them under guard until their disposition could be decided upon. Of that we'll say no more.

We'll talk rather of Governor Liang, fleeing the city under the protection of Li Cheng. They ran into Wen Da, returning with the remnants of his defeated army, and joined forces and travelled south together. Suddenly, the forward units set up a clamor. Fan Rui the Demon King Who Roils the World, with Xiang Chong on his left and Li Gun on his right—three infantry commanders—were advancing on them with flourishing knives and spears. And behind the fugitives appeared Lei Heng the Winged Tiger, plus Shi En and Mu Chun, each leading a thousand foot soldiers and cutting off their retreat.

Truly, the keeper sends the prisoner back to jail, the doctor orders the patient to return to bed.

Were Governor Liang and his men able to escape? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 67
Song Jiang Rewards His Three Armies
Guan Sheng Defeats the Water and Fire Generals

Fighting desperately, Governor Liang's forces broke through the strong encirclement and fled west. Fan Rui, plus Xiang Chong and Li Gun, tried to catch them in vain. Finally, with Lei Heng, Shi En and Mu Chun, they returned to the Northern Capital to await further orders.

Military Advisor Wu Yong, in the city, directed that proclamations be posted reassuring the citizenry and that the fires be extinguished. All the members of the families of Governor Liang, Li Cheng, Wen Da and Prefect

Wang were either killed or ran away. No one bothered to inquire. The prefectural treasury was broken open, and its gold, silver, precious objects, silks and satins were loaded on carts. The conquerors also opened the granary. They distributed relief grain to the entire populace and loaded the remainder on carts also, for removal to the Mount Liangshan fortress.

Wu Yong ordered his commanders and men to prepare to march. Li Gu and the wife of Lu the Magnate were placed on prisoner carts and the cages nailed fast. The outlaw forces were divided into three contingents, then all set out for Liangshan Marsh. Dai Zong went on ahead to inform Song Jiang.

Song Jiang summoned the generals in the stronghold and they descended the mountain to greet the returning chieftains and escort them to Loyalty Hall. On meeting Lu the Magnate, Song Jiang kowtowed. Lu Junyi returned the courtesy.

“It was our desire to invite you here, Magnate, to join us in striving for righteousness,” said Song. “We never thought we would encounter such difficulties and that you would nearly lose your life. Our hearts were torn with anxiety! But Heaven protected you, and we meet again. We are infinitely relieved.”

Lu bowed. “Thanks to brother's prestigious power and the virtue of his chieftains, with united hearts and strength you have saved my humble self. I could never adequately express my gratitude, though I scattered my innards on the ground.”

He presented Cai Qing and Cai Fu to Song Jiang and said: “If it weren't for these two I would not be here!”

Song wanted Lu to take over as leader. The Magnate was astonished. “How could a man like me command the mountain fortress?” he said. “Let me be your groom, brother, an ordinary soldier, to return your kindness in saving my life. That would be my greatest pleasure.”

Song Jiang continued to press him, but Lu wouldn't hear of it. Li Kui protested.

“If you hand over the leadership to someone else, brother, I'm going to start killing!”

And Wu Song added his complaint. “You're always trying to give your command away. It chills us brothers to the heart!”

“What do you varlets understand,” Song Jiang shouted. “Stop your chatter!”

“You mustn't insist, brother,” Lu said hurriedly. “You're making me very uneasy.”

Li Kui had a suggestion. “Everything is quiet, now,” he said. “You be emperor, brother. Let Lu the Magnate be your prime minister. Make us all big officials. We'll fight our way into the Eastern Capital and seize the friggin throne! That would be a lot better than friggin around here!”

Song Jiang was furious. He swore at Li Kui.

“Let Lu the Magnate rest in the east wing as our guest,” Wu Yong offered soothingly. “Later on, when he has performed some meritorious deeds, we can talk again about relinquishing the leadership.”

Only then did Song Jiang cool down. He told Yan Qing to share quarters with Lu, and provided accommodations for Cai Fu and Cai Qing and-their households. Guan Sheng's family had already been brought to the fortress by Xue Yong.

Song Jiang ordered that a big feast be laid. He generously rewarded his cavalry, infantry and naval forces. He directed his commanders, high and low, to provide wine for their various units. Inside Loyalty Hall the chieftains, politely deferring to one another, drank and made merry.

Lu the Magnate rose to his feet. “The adulterous pair have been caught and are awaiting disposition.”

Song Jiang smiled. “I'd forgotten. Bring them here!”

Men opened the cages of the prison carts and dragged the captives into the Hall. Li Gu was bound to the main pillar on the left, Lu's wife to the main

pillar on the right.

“There's no need to interrogate these rascals,” said Song. “Lu the Magnate, do with them what you will.”

A dagger in his hand, Lu walked over to the culprits and cursed them furiously. He carved out their hearts, cut off their limbs and cast their bodies to the ground. Then he returned to the banquet and thanked the assemblage. The chieftains congratulated him and complimented him profusedly.

Meanwhile, Governor Liang, hearing that the outlaw forces had withdrawn, returned to the city with Li Cheng and Wen Da and their defeated army. The three found that nine-tenths of their families had been killed, and they loudly lamented. Armies arrived from neighboring towns to chase the men of Mount Liangshan, but by then they were far away. Governor Liang told the armies to return.

His wife had concealed herself in a flower garden in the rear and had escaped with her life. She advised Liang to petition the emperor to dispatch an army and wipe out the bandits and obtain vengeance, and at the same time to write a letter to her father the premier letting him know. Liang did so, reporting that over five thousand civilians had been killed and innumerable people wounded, with losses to the military exceeding thirty thousand.

The governor's emissary reached the premier's chancellery in a few days. He dismounted and was announced. The premier ordered that he be allowed to enter. The emissary went directly to the ceremonial hall, kowtowed, and presented the secret missive addressed to the throne. He related how the brigands had broken into the Northern Capital, and said they were a large and powerful foe.

Originally, Premier Cai Jing favored an amnesty. The credit Governor Liang would receive for effectuating it would also reflect favorably on himself. But the mission had failed miserably—a fact which could not be concealed. Now Cai wanted an all-out war.

“You may withdraw,” he snapped.

At the Fifth watch the following morning the Imperial Bell sounded, and civil and military officials gathered in the Waiting Court. Premier Cai stood at their head. Approaching the Jade Dais, he offered Governor Liang's petition to the Virtuous Sovereign. The emperor read it and was shocked.

Zhao Ding, a counsellor, stepped forward and said: “We've sent soldiers after those bandits a number of times, but always suffered heavy losses. That's because the terrain is in their favor. In my humble opinion, it would be better to grant them amnesty, recall them to the throne, give their leaders high rank and put them to the defense of our borders. That would solve it.”

Cai Jing was very angry. “You're an imperial counsellor,” he shouted, “yet you want to destroy our imperial discipline! Lowly madman, you deserve to die!”

“I order you to leave this court at once,” said the emperor. He divested Zhao Ding of his office and returned him to the status of ordinary citizen.

No one dared to offer any other proposals.

“Those bandits are outrageous,” the emperor said to Cai Jing. “Who can we send to capture them?”

“They're only a gang of robbers in the wilds. We've no need for a large army. I'd like to recommend two officers—Shan Tinggui and Wei Dingguo, both commandants of Lingzhou Prefecture. If Your Majesty will issue an order and dispatch an emissary to fetch them and their men at all speed, they will be able to sweep away the filth.”

Very pleased, the emperor issued commissions and directed the Council of Military Affairs to have them executed. Rising, the monarch left the chamber, followed by the multitude of officials. Many of them smiled sceptically to themselves.

The next day Cai Jing chose a chancellery official to deliver the imperial commissions to Lingzhou.

In the mountain stronghold, Song Jiang distributed among his infantry, cavalry and naval forces the valuables obtained from the treasury of the Northern Capital. Cows and horses were slaughtered, and feasts were held several days in succession to welcome Lu the Magnate. Although they had no fine delicacies, there were mountains of meat and seas of wine. The chieftains imbibed until they were half drunk-

“For the sake of Lu the Magnate,” said Wu Yong, “we damaged the Northern Capital, slew many of its people, robbed the treasury, and chased Governor Liang and his generals out of the city. Surely, he'll report to the emperor. He won't let the matter drop, particularly since his father-in-law is the premier. They're bound to dispatch an army against us.”

“There's reason for your concern, Military Advisor,” said Song Jiang. “Let's send a man to the Northern Capital tonight to ferret out the news. Then we'll know how to prepare.”

Wu Yong laughed. “I've already done that. He should be back soon.”

While they were still discussing the problem at the banquet, the spy returned. “Governor Liang has petitioned the throne for a punitive army,” he reported. “Counsellor Zhao Ding proposed an amnesty, but Cai Jing cursed him and had him kicked out of office. The emperor has commissioned Shan Tinggui and Wei Dingguo, commandants of Lingzhou Prefecture, to proceed against us with their soldiers.”

“How shall we confront the foe?” asked Song Jiang.

“Let them come,” said Wu Yong. “We'll take them all in one swoop.”

Guan Sheng rose and addressed the two. “I'm deeply grateful for the hospitality you brothers have extended to me ever since I arrived at this mountain,” he said. “But I haven't done anything in return. I met Shan and Wei many times when I was still in Pudong, and I know all about them. Shan is very clever at using water to inundate enemy troops, and so everyone calls him the Water General. Wei is skilled with fire in his attacks.

He employs flame-throwers on the battlefield, and so he's known as the Fire General.

“I have no talent, but if you'll let me have five thousand men, I'll stop those two on the road before they can get started. If they're willing to surrender, I'll bring them here. If they're not, I'll capture them and deliver them as my gift. There's no need for you brothers to use a large heavily armed force and tax your energies and spirits. I wonder whether you would consider my idea?”

Song Jiang was delighted. He instructed Xuan Zan and Hao Siwen to go along, and consented to give Guan Sheng the five thousand men he requested. The following morning Song Jiang and his chieftains feasted and saw the three commanders off at the Shore of Golden Sands, where they departed with their troops.

The chieftains returned to Loyalty Hall and Wu Yong said to Song Jiang: “Guan Sheng has gone, but we don't guarantee his devotion. We'd better have some good commanders follow and keep an eye on him. They can act as support forces.”

“He seems a highly chivalrous person to me. He's shown no sign of wavering. You shouldn't doubt him.”

“I'm afraid his heart might not be the same as yours, brother. I say let Lin Chong and Yang Zhi, with Sun Li and Huang Xin as their lieutenants, go down with another five thousand men.”

“I want to go, too,” said Li Kui.

“There's no need for you this time,” said Song Jiang. “We already have enough good commanders.”

“I'll get sick if this idleness keeps on! If you don't let me go along, I'll go on my own!”

“You listen to orders or I'll have your head!”

Sulkily, Li Kui left the Hall.

Lin Chong and Yang Zhi led troops down the mountain to support Guan Sheng. The next day an officer came and reported: “Black Whirlwind Li Kui left last night at the second watch with his two axes. No one knows where he's bound.”

Song Jiang groaned. “All because I said a few harsh words! He's probably gone to join another band!”

“You're wrong, brother,” said Wu Yong. “Li Kui may be rough and crude, but his sense of chivalry is very strong. He'd never join anyone else. He'll be back in a day or two. Don't worry.”

But Song Jiang was very upset. He first sent Dai Zong after Li Kui, and later Shi Qian, Li Yun, Yue Ho and Wang Ding with four more separate search parties.

When Li Kui went down the mountain with his two axes during the night, he followed a small path in the direction of Lingzhou. “So many men and horses to fight two friggin generals!” he muttered. “I'll charge into the town and kill them with one chop of the ax each! That'll shake up brother Song Jiang, and raise my prestige again with the others!”

After walking half a day, he grew hungry. He groped in his waist purse and found that he had left the mountain in such a hurry he'd forgotten to take any money.

“It's a long time since I've robbed anyone,” he thought, “but now I'll have to find some oaf to vent my anger on.”

By the side of the road he saw a rustic tavern. He went in, sat down, consumed three measures of wine and two catties of meat, then rose and started to leave. The waiter stopped him and asked for money.

“I'll give it to you soon,” said Li Kui. “Wait till I do a little business up ahead.” He turned to go.

A huge ferocious-looking fellow came in. “You've got your nerve, you swarthy villain,” he shouted. “Who runs a tavern so that you can eat for free!”

Li Kui glared. “This lord eats for free wherever he goes.”

“When I tell you who I am, you'll be pissing and farting in terror. This lord is Han Bolong of Liangshan Marsh. The money to open this tavern was given to me by brother Song Jiang personally.”

Li Kui grinned inwardly. “Our stronghold never even heard of this friggin lout,” he thought.

As a matter of fact Han, who originally was a robber, had wanted to join the band on Mount Liangshan. He had sought out Zhu Gui the Dry-Land Crocodile and requested that he lead him to Song Jiang. But because Song first developed a growth on his back and then became very involved in warfare, he had been too busy to see anyone. Zhu Gui had told Han to carry on with his tavern business.

Now, Li Kui took one of the axes from his belt and offered it to Han Bolong. “Keep this as a pledge,” he said.

Han didn't know it was a trick. As he reached for the ax, Li Kui whipped out its mate and cracked open Han's forehead with a splitting crunch. What a pity that Han Bolong, who'd been a bold ruffian half his life, should die at the hands of Li Kui!

The two or three waiters fled into the village, sorry that they had been born with only two legs. Li Kui took whatever money he could find, set fire to the thatched building, and continued on towards Lingzhou.

He had travelled less than a day when a big fellow approached from the side of the highway and examined him from head to toe.

“What are you looking at this lord for, varlet?” Li Kui demanded.

“Whose lord are you?” the man retorted.

Li Kui rushed him. With one blow of his fist the fellow knocked Li Kui flat on his backside.

“He throws a nice punch,” thought Black Whirlwind, sitting on the ground. He raised his face and asked: “What's your name?”

“This lord hasn't any name. But if you want to fight, come on! Do you dare get up?”

Enraged, Li Kui prepared to jump to his feet. But a kick in the ribs from the big man sent him sprawling. “I can't lick this fellow,” cried Li Kui. He hauled himself erect and started to leave.

The man shouted for him to halt, and asked: “What's your name, swarthy fellow?”

“Since I've lost, I'd rather not say. But you're a gallant fellow, so I won't deceive you. I'm Li Kui the Black Whirlwind of Liangshan Marsh.”

“Are you, really? Don't lie, now.”

“If you don't believe me, look at these two axes.”

“What are you doing out alone, if you're a Mount Liangshan man?”

“Big Brother squelched me, so I'm going to Lingzhou to kill two fellows named Shan and Wei.”

“I hear that a force from the stronghold is already heading that way. Can you tell me who's in it?”

“Guan Sheng the Big Halberd is in command. He's followed by reinforcements under Panther Head Lin Chong and Yang Zhi the Blue-Faced Beast.”

Convinced, the man dropped to his knees and kowtowed.

“Truly,” said Li Kui, “what is your name?”

“I was born in the district of Zhongshan. My family have been wrestlers for three generations. Our ways of striking with hands and feet have been passed down from father to son. We don't teach outsiders. But I've never had any good connections, and no one I've tried to throw in with would have me. I'm known all through Shandong and Hebei as Jiao Ting the Merciless.

“Recently, I heard that in Kouzhou Prefecture there's a place called Withered Trees Mountain, and on it is a robber who loves to kill. Though his name is Bao Xu, everyone calls him the God of Death. He goes forth from his mountain to rob and pillage. I'm on my way to join his band.”

“A man with your skill ought to be joining Song Jiang, our Big Brother.”

“I'd been hoping to go to your fortress for a long time, but I never had anybody to introduce me. Now that I've met you, brother, I'll be glad to join Big Brother Song Jiang.”

“I've got to show him a thing or two, first. I've come all the way down the mountain and I haven't killed a single person. I can't return empty-handed. We'll go to Lingzhou, kill the two commandants Shan and Wei, then head back to our fortress together.”

“Lingzhou is a fortified town. It's full of soldiers. With all our skill, just the two of us attacking wouldn't be any use. We'd only be throwing our lives away. We'd be better off going to Withered Trees Mountain and persuading Bao Xu to join the band with us on Mount Liangshan. That would be best.”

While they were talking, Shi Qian approached behind them. He called to Li Kui: “Big Brother has been very worried about you. Please come back to the mountain. Four parties are out searching for you.”

Li Kui introduced Jiao Ting.

“Big Brother is waiting for you,” Shi Qian persisted.

“Enough,” cried Li Kui. “Jiao Ting and I have it all settled. We're going to Withered Trees Mountain, first, and get Bao Xu to join us.”

“You can't. Big Brother is waiting. We have to return to the stronghold now.”

“If you won't come with me, tell Big Brother what I'm doing. I'll be back soon.”

Shi Qian was afraid of Li Kui. He returned to the mountain fortress alone. Jiao Ting and Li Kui proceeded to Kouzhou Prefecture and headed towards Withered Trees Mountain.

As to Guan Sheng, with Xuan Zan and Hao Siwen and five thousand brigands, he neared Lingzhou. The prefect had already received the imperial mandate to transfer troops to the Eastern Capital, plus a directive from the premier. He summoned commandants Shan and Wei to a conference and transmitted the directive to them. The two officers mustered their soldiers, issued arms, had the horses saddled and bridled, drew grain and fodder, and fixed a date for departure.

Suddenly, a messenger arrived and announced: “Guan Sheng the Big Halberd of Pudong has arrived with troops and is invading our prefecture.”

Shan and Wei were furious. At the head of their soldiers, they rode forth to confront the foe. As the two armies drew near they could see each others' drams and flags. From beneath an arch of pennants, Guan Sheng rode forward. On the far side, as drums thundered, the Water General, astride a black steed, appeared, gripping a black lance. His helmet, his armor, his robe, his boots—all were black. He was preceded by a man carrying a northern-style black banner which bore the inscription: *Water General Shan Tinggui.*

On the near side, bridle bells jingled as the Fire General Wei Tingguo rode out. His accoutrements were mainly red, and he was preceded by a soldier carrying an embroidered red banner in the southern style which bore the inscription: *Fire General Wei Tingguo.*

The two commandants entered the combat area together. Astride his horse, Guan Sheng greeted them courteously: “It's been a long time since we met, commandants.”

Shan and Wei laughed. They pointed at Guan Sheng and reviled him: “Talentless, mad rebel! You're unworthy of the emperor's kindness. You've besmirched your ancestor's name! Now you recklessly lead troops here. It's completely inexcusable!”

“Commandants, you're mistaken,” Guan Sheng replied. “Our sovereign has been deceived. Treacherous ministers have taken power. They employ only their intimates, they reprove only their enemies. But brother Song Liang is a man of virtue and benevolence who performs righteous deeds on Heaven's behalf. He has sent me here to invite you to join us. If you don't consider me too lowly, permit me to escort you to our mountain stronghold.”

His words infuriated the commandants. Together, they charged, one like a dark cloud from the north, the other like a ball of flame from the south. As Guan Sheng waited to meet them, Xuan Zan flew out from his left and Hao Siwen burst forth from his right, and clashed with the two attackers, head on. Sword against sword flashed icily in ten thousand streaks, lance against lance filled the air with the chill of death.

Guan Sheng, watching from a distance, was full of admiration for the commandants. Suddenly, they broke off the engagement, turned their horses, and rode back into their own position. Hao Siwen and Xuan Zan closely pursued. Wei turned to the left, Shan to the right, followed respectively by Xuan and Hao.

As Xuan Zan gave chase, four or five hundred foot soldiers, with pennants and armor of red, stretched out in a single line and surrounded him. Hooked poles extended, nooses flew, and both horse and rider were snared.

Hao, pursuing Shan to the right, was also surrounded by five hundred infantry, only these had black pennants and armor. They surged up from behind and captured him.

While the two were being led off towards Lingzhou, Shan and Wei, with five hundred troops each, again came racing forth. Guan Sheng was unable to cope. He fell back with his men. Wei and Shan clapped their horses and pursued. Then, ahead of him, Guan Sheng suddenly saw two chieftains galloping in his direction. They were Lin Chong and Yang Zhi, and they

swept around his flanks and plunged in among the Lingzhou soldiers, slaughtering and scattering them. Guan Sheng halted his remnant contingent, and united it with the Lin and Yang forces. He met the two, and was joined subsequently by Sun Li and Huang Xin. All made camp together.

The Water and Fire Generals, with Xuan Zan and Hao Siwen as captives, returned triumphantly to the town. Prefect Zhang received them, and had wine served in congratulation. He ordered that cage carts be built for the two prisoners, and directed an aide to set out that very night and deliver them to the Eastern Capital, with a guard of three hundred foot soldiers, and report the arrest to the imperial court.

The party followed a winding road towards the Eastern Capital. They came to a mountain covered with withered trees and dried reeds. To the crash of gongs, a gang of robbers suddenly appeared. The man in the lead brandished a pair of battle-axes, and he had a voice like thunder. It was Li Kui the Black Whirlwind of Liangshan Marsh. And behind him was Jiao Ting the Merciless. They and their outlaws blocked the road and, without a word, seized the prisoner carts.

As the aide turned to flee, Bao Xu the God of Death, with an iron face and bulging eyes, closed in from behind. He swung his sword and hacked the aide from his steed. The rest of the escort party abandoned the carts and ran for their lives.

Li Kui saw that the prisoners were Xuan Zan and Hao Siwen, and he asked how they came to be in such a predicament.

“But what are you doing here?” Xuan countered.

“Big Brother wouldn't let me join in the slaughter, so I came down the mountain on my own. First I killed Han Bolong, then I ran into Jiao Ting, and he brought me here. Bao Xu was like an old friend as soon as we met. He's been treating me like a brother. We'd just agreed to attack Lingzhou when a lookout on the mountain spotted soldiers convoying prisoner carts

in this direction. I figured that government troops had captured some bandits, but I never dreamed it was you."

Bao Xu invited everyone into his stronghold and feasted them with mutton and wine. Hao Siwen said to him: "Since you're willing to join us in Liangshan Marsh, brother, why not combine forces in an attack on Lingzhou? That would be an excellent arrangement."

"Brother Li Kui and I were talking about going in together. Combining with you is even better. I also have two or three hundred good horses I can give."

Bao Xu led his six or seven hundred men, and the five bold fellows set out together for Lingzhou.

Soldiers in the escort who had fled back to the town hurried and reported to Prefect Zhang: "Robbers intercepted us on the road. They seized the prisoner carts and killed our officer."

Shan and Wei were enraged. "We'll capture those rogues," they vowed, "and bring them here for execution!"

Then they heard that Guan Sheng was outside the town with troops and challenging them to battle, Shan rushed to be the first to respond. The city gate was opened and the drawbridge lowered and he rode forth at the head of a thousand cavalry. From an arch of pennants five hundred horsemen in black armor sped to the battlefield, with the Water General in the lead. He was an imposing figure as he loudly reviled Guan Sheng.

"Traitorous failure, you're going to die!"

Waving his halberd, Guan Sheng clapped his horse. They fought only twenty rounds when Guan Sheng pulled his steed's head around and quickly departed. Shan chased him for more than ten *li*. Guan Sheng flung some words over his shoulder.

"You'd better dismount and surrender! What are you waiting for?"

Shan thrust his levelled lance at Guan's back. But Guan Sheng, with his fabulous agility, parried the weapon with a sharp rap, shouting at the same time: “Down you go!” The diverted momentum brought Shan out of his saddle to the ground. Guan dismounted and helped him to his feet.

“I beg your pardon, General,” he cried.

The frightened Shan kowtowed. He begged for his life and surrendered;

“I have spoken of you often to Big Brother Song Jiang.” said Guan. “He's dispatched me specially to invite you two generals to join us in striving for righteousness.”

“Talentless though I am, I will gladly do my humble utmost to work together on Heaven's behalf.”

The two rode side by side and continued to talk. Lin Chong saw them and asked what had happened. Guan Sheng said nothing of victor or vanquished.

“We met in the mountains and got to chatting about old times, and I persuaded him to come with us,” he merely remarked.

Lin Chong and the others were delighted. Shan returned to the front and shouted a command. Five hundred yelling soldiers in black armor swarmed over to the outlaws' side. The remainder fled back to town and hurriedly reported to the prefect.

Wei was greatly angered by the news. The next day he rode out with his troops to give battle. Shan, Guan Sheng and Lin Chong proceeded directly to the front. From the arch of banners opposite, the Fire General advanced on his battle charger. He cursed when he saw Shan following Guan Sheng.

“Ungrateful traitors, conscienceless wretches!”

With a laugh, Guan Sheng clapped his steed and rode forward to meet him. The two clashed, brandishing weapons. They had fought less than ten

rounds when Wei galloped back to his position. Guan Sheng started to follow. He was stopped by a shout from Shan.

“Don't go after him, Commander!”

The Big Halberd quickly reined in. Five hundred fire soldiers, dressed in red, came flying from Lingzhou, and all carried incendiary implements. To the front and rear of their ranks were fifty carts piled high with very inflammable dry reeds. Each man had on his back an iron flask containing sulphur, nitrate and other incendiaries. The fire soldiers set all these ablaze and dashed among their foe. Men and horses, seared by the flames, fell dead or wounded. Guan Sheng's forces scattered in every direction. They retreated forty *li* before they halted and made camp.

Wei called in his troops and turned towards the town. He found it billowing with flames and smoke. What had happened was that Black Whirlwind Li Kui, together with Jiao Ting and Bao Xu and the robbers of Withered Trees Mountain, had approached Lingzhou from the rear and broken through the North Gate. They tore into the town, setting fires and pillaging Lingzhou's granary and treasury.

When Wei learned of this, he dared not enter. He hastily withdrew his troops, harried from behind by Guan Sheng who had again caught up. Communications between front and rear were disrupted. In any event, Lingzhou was already lost. Wei retreated to Zhongling, a county seat, and settled in. Guan Sheng surrounded the town and ordered his commanders to attack. Wei kept the gates closed and refused to come out.

“He's a brave man,” Shan said to Guan Sheng and Lin Chong. “He'd rather die than submit to pressure. Go easy and you'll succeed. You won't get anywhere being impatient. I'm willing to go into the town, whatever the risks, and try to persuade him to surrender.”

Guan Sheng was very pleased. He agreed to let Shan go in alone. An officer reported Shan's arrival. Wei came out to greet him and invited him into the hall.

“The imperial court has no lustre and the land is in turmoil,” said Shan. “The emperor is confused, wicked ministers hold power. We're now serving Song Jiang, in Liangshan Marsh. Later, when the treacherous ministers have been deposed? there will be time enough to return to court and stamp out evil and restore correctness.”

Wei considered this-in silence for several minutes. Finally, he said: “I'll surrender only if Guan Sheng asks me to, in person. Otherwise, I'd rather die than submit.”

Shan mounted his horse and returned with the reply. Guan Sheng said: “I'm a person of no consequence. The general rates me too highly.” He prepared to set out, accompanied only by Shan.

“You'd better think it over, brother,” said Lin Chong. “A man's mind is hard to fathom.”

“The brave fear nothing,” said Guan Sheng. He rode directly to the county government office. Wei, receiving him with joy, kowtowed and surrendered. They talked of old times together, and Wei entertained Guan Sheng at a feast. That same day, he went with him to the brigands' camp, accompanied by five hundred of his fire soldiers. There he was introduced to Lin Chong, Yang Zhi and the other chieftains. The outlaw forces were re-assembled and all set out for the mountain fortress.

Song Jiang had sent Dai Zong to meet them on the road. When the Marvellous Traveller saw Li Kui he said: “Because you sneaked off down the mountain, we brothers have had to do a lot of wasted running around. Shi Qian, Yue Ho, Li Yun and Wang Dingliu have already gone back. I'd better return too and tell Big Brother, so he won't worry about you any more.”

Dai Zong went on ahead. Guan Sheng and the others proceeded to the Shore of Golden Sands, where the naval unit in several trips ferried them across.

A man came running towards them, panting and exhausted. They all recognized him. It was Duan Jingzhu the Golden Dog.

“Didn't you go Up north with Yang Lin and Shi Yong to buy horses?” asked Lin Chong. “Why have you come back in such a flurry?”

Duan's reply was brief, but as a result Song Jiang dispatched an army to attack a certain place. An old debt was expunged, vengeance was attained. Truly, he knew very well his words were a hook and line that once more would fish out trouble.

What then was it that Duan said to Lin Chong and the others? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 68
Song Jiang Attacks Zengtou Village at Night
Lu the Magnate Captures Shi Wengong

“I went north with Yang Lin and Shi Yong to buy horses,” Duan said, “and I picked over two hundred strong, well-sinewed, fine-coated steeds. But on the way back, while passing through Qingzhou Prefecture, we were set upon by a gang of robbers, headed by Yu Baosi, known as the Spirit of the Dangerous Road. There were more than two hundred of them. They stole all our animals and took them to Zengtou Village. I don't know where Shi Yong and Yang Lin have gone. I fled through the night and am hastening to the stronghold to report.”

Lin Chong agreed that it was necessary to discuss the matter with Big Brother. They all forded the river and repaired to Loyalty Hall, where they met Song Jiang. Guan Sheng introduced Shan and Wei to the various chieftains. Li Kui told how, after going down the mountain, he killed Han Bolong, met Jiao Ting and Bao Xu and, with them, broke into Lingzhou. Song Jiang was very pleased with the addition of these four brave men.

But he grew very angry when Duan related the robbery of the horses. “They did this sort of thing to me before,” he cried, “and now they've behaved discourteously again! I've been unhappy day and night because I haven't avenged the death at their hands of Chao Gai the Heavenly King. If I still don't avenge him now, I'll be the butt of ridicule and shame!”

“Spring is here,” said Wu Yong, “the ideal season for battle. When we attacked them before, we failed to utilize the terrain. This time we must be clever.”

“I hate them to the marrow of my bones. I'll get my revenge or, I swear, I'll never return!”

“Shi Qian can fly over eaves and skim atop walls. Send him in to scout around. When he comes back, we'll confer.”

Flea on a Drum was dispatched to Zengtou. Two or three days later, Yang Lin and Shi Yong, who had escaped, arrived at the fortress. They said that Shi Wengong had been boasting in Zengtou that there was no room on this earth for both him and the outlaws of Liangshan Marsh. Song Jiang was in favor of mustering their troops immediately.

But Wu Yong said. “Wait till Shi Qian comes back and reports. It will be time enough, then.”

Song Jiang, filled with rage, was thirsting for revenge. He couldn't contain himself. He sent Dai Zong to fly to the village and report back quickly with all the news he could find. In only a few days Dai Zong returned.

“Zengtou wants to avenge itself for Lingzhou,” he said. “They're raising an army and setting up a big emplacement at the village entrance, with headquarters in the Fahua Monastery. Banners mark their outposts for hundreds of *li* around. I don't know how we can get in there.”

The following day Shi Qian returned and reported: “I made very detailed inquiries. They've built five forts. More than two thousand men are guarding the entrance, under Shi Wengong. This is the main fort. The north fort is commanded by Zeng Tu, with Su Ding as his lieutenant. Zeng Mi, the second Zeng son, is in charge of the south fort. Zeng Suo, the third son, commands the west fort. The east fort is under Zeng Kui, the fourth son. The central position, in the village itself, is held by the fifth son Zeng Sheng and the father Zeng Nong. Yu Baosi the Spirit of the Dangerous Road is a huge fellow with an enormous girth. He's feeding those horses he stole inside the monastery grounds.”

Wu Yong summoned the chieftains to a conference. “Since they've got five forts,” he said, “we'll divide into five columns and attack each separately.”

Lu the Magnate rose. “I have not yet shown my gratitude for being rescued and brought here. I would now like to go forward and give my all. Would that, I wonder, meet with your respected approval?”

Song Jiang was delighted. “If you're willing to go down the mountain, Magnate, you may lead the vanguard.”

“The Magnate has arrived only recently,” Wu Yong intervened. “He has no battle experience, the mountain paths are tortuous and ill-suited for riding. Rather than lead the vanguard, he would be better at the head of a contingent in ambush on the plain. When he hears the sound of our central unit's cannon, he can reinforce us.”

Wu Yong was afraid that Lu would capture Shi Wengong and Song Jiang would feel constrained to fulfil the dying wish of Chao Gai that leadership be given to whoever caught his killer. Song Jiang, on the contrary, hoped that Lu would make the capture precisely so that he could turn over command of the stronghold to him out of respect to Chao Gai. But Wu Yong was adamant. He directed Lu to go with Yan Qing and five hundred infantry to paths upon the plain and await the signal.

Wu Yong divided the outlaw forces into five columns. Against the fort due south of Zengtou would go three thousand cavalry under Qin Ming the Thunderbolt and Hua Rong, seconded by Ma Lin and Deng Fei. The fort east of the village would be attacked by three thousand infantry under Sagacious Lu the Tattooed Monk and Wu Song the Pilgrim, with Kong Ming and Kong Liang as their lieutenants. Yang Zhi the Blue-Faced Beast and Nine Dragons Shi Jin, seconded by Yang Chun and Chen Da, would lead three thousand cavalry against the fort north of Zengtou. Sent against the fort to the west were three thousand infantry under Zhu Tong the Beautiful Beard and Lei Heng the Winged Tiger. Zou Yuan and Zou Run were their seconds in command. The central fort would be attacked by five thousand troops under commander-in-chief Song Jiang, Military Advisor Wu Yong, and Gongsun Sheng, accompanied by LU Fang, Guo Sheng, Xie Zhen, Xie Bao, Dai Zong and Shi Qian. Bringing up the rear would be a

five thousand man unit of mixed infantry and cavalry under Li Kui the Black Whirlwind and Fan Rui the Demon King Who Roils the World, with Xiang Chong and Li Gun as their lieutenants. The remaining chieftains would stay to guard the mountain stronghold.

The five columns led by Song Jiang advanced rapidly. Scouts reported their approach to Zeng Senior, who summoned Shi Wengong and Su Ding for a military conference.

“All we have to do is dig a lot of concealed pits and we'll catch their toughest commanders and fiercest men,” said Shi. “That's the best way to deal with those scruffy bandits!”

Zeng Senior ordered his vassals out with mattocks and shovels to dig pits all round the entrance to the village, and cover them over with mats and earth. Then he had soldiers lie in ambush near the pits and wait for the arrival of the enemy. He had a dozen of so pits also dug around the northern approach to the village.

While Song Jiang's army was on the march Wu Yong sent Shi Qian ahead to scout. A few days later, Flea on a Drum returned and reported: “Pits have been dug north and south of Zengtou, I don't know how many, to trap us.”

Wu Yong laughed. “Nothing remarkable about that!” He led the troops on until they were quite near the village.

Around noon that day the advance unit saw a rider passing by. Bronze bells tinkled on his horse's neck, and pheasant plumes were tied to its tail. The rider wore a black hat and white robe, and he carried a short spear.

Men of the vanguard wanted to give chase, but Wu Yong stopped them. He ordered them to make camp where they were, dig a deep moat on all four sides, and lay out a perimeter of iron spikes. Each of the five columns was directed to do the same.

For the next three days no one came forward from the Zengtou forts to give battle. Wu Yong once again sent Shi Qian, this time disguised as a junior officer manning one of the ambushes, to find out why. Flea on a Drum

made a mental note of the concealed pits, how far they were from the various forts, and how many of them there were in total. In a single day, he had all the information required, in detail, and he returned and reported.

The next day Wu Yong instructed the vanguard infantry to divide into two units, equipped with mattocks. He also directed that one hundred carts be loaded with reeds and dry brushwood and be concealed among the central column.

That night he ordered that the infantry columns first attack the forts to the east and west of Zengtou at mid-morning the following day. The cavalry under Yang Zhi and Shi Jin should spread out in a straight line before the northern fort. If the foe there beat drums and waved banners, they should put on a display of fight, but under no circumstances advance. Wu Yong's orders were transmitted.

Shi Wengong was hoping that Song Jiang's forces would attack the south fort and fall into the concealed pits. The road before it was narrow.

Where else could they go?

At mid-morning the next day the sound of cannon was heard up ahead. Pursuit troops gathered at the south gate. Then a messenger arrived from the east fort.

“A monk with an iron staff and a pilgrim brandishing a pair of long knives are attacking us front and rear,” he reported.

“They must be Sagacious Lu and Wu Song of Liangshan Marsh,” said Shi Wengong. He sent part of his soldiers to support Zeng Kui.

From the west fort another messenger arrived. “A big fellow with a long beard and a robber with a face like a tiger, with banners reading *Beautiful Beard Zhu Tong* and *Winged-Tiger Lei Heng,* are pressing us hard,” he said.

Shi Wengong sent a portion of his men to aid Zeng Suo. Once more cannon boomed ahead. Shi had no more troops to spare. He could only wait for his

adversaries to advance and tumble into the pits, at which time his soldiers hiding behind the hills would come out and help Shi nab them.

But Wu Yong swept forward around the hills in two flanking movements. The infantry guarding the fort was afraid to leave it. The soldiers flushed out of ambush were driven towards the fort by Wu Yong's pursuing troops, and large numbers of them fell into the pits.

Shi Wengong was about to sally forth when Wu Yong pointed with his whip. Gongs crashed and from the midst of the outlaw forces a hundred carts were pushed out and set ablaze. The conflagration of reeds, brushwood, sulphur and nitrate concealed the sky with smoke and flames. By the time Shi and his soldiers emerged their road was blocked by burning carts. They could only avoid them and hastily retreat. Gongsun waved his sword and conjured up a mighty wind which blew the flames into the south gate of the fort. Several buildings and part of the stockade burst into blaze and were destroyed.

A victory had been won. Trumpets summoned the outlaws to reassemble. They returned to their camps and rested. That night Shi repaired his gate and both sides secured their positions.

The next day Zeng Tu said to Shi Wengong: “If we don't kill their leaders it will be hard to wipe those bandits out.” Telling his tutor to defend the fort, he donned his armor, mounted, and rode out at the head of his troops to challenge his adversaries to battle.

When Song Jiang heard who it was, he proceeded to the front, escorted by Lu Fang and Guo Sheng. He saw Zeng Tu under an arch of banners, and he burned with hatred. He pointed at him with his whip.

“Who will take that scamp for me and get me my long-awaited revenge?”

Lu Fang the Little Duke clapped his steed and rode against Zeng Tu, holding upright his crescent-bladed halberd. The antagonists met amid a clash of weapons. They fought over thirty rounds. From beneath the arch of pennants Guo Sheng could see that Lu Fang was weakening. He had fought

well for the first thirty rounds, but his movements had become clumsy, and he was forced on the defensive.

Fearful that Lu Fang would be defeated, Guo Sheng suddenly mounted and, twirling his own crescent-bladed halberd, flew onto the battlefield and joined in the attack on Zeng Tu. The three horsemen locked in combat.

A panther's tail, with spots like gold coins, dangled from the head of each of the halberds. Both were lifted as the two outlaws closed in to seize their opponent. Zeng Tu had a quick eye. He raised his lance and entangled the tails, but the crimson tassel on his own weapon was also caught. He couldn't pull them apart. All three men were wrenching to free them.

Hua Rong, watching from the outlaws' position, was afraid his two companions would suffer. He rode forward, his left hand grasping his bow, his right hastily fitting a long slim arrow. He bent the bow and let fly at Zeng Tu. At that very moment Zeng Tu had extricated his lance, while the halberds were still entangled and, quicker than it takes to say, was thrusting at Lu Fang's neck. The arrow struck him in the left arm, knocking him from his saddle. Lu Fang and Guo Sheng's halberds swiftly took his life.

A dozen horsemen galloped back and reported to Shi Wengong, who reported in turn to the central fort. Zeng Senior wept aloud. The warrior beside him, his son Zeng Sheng, was enraged. A man of superb skill with arms, he wielded a pair of swords with such deadliness that no foe dared come near him. He ground his teeth in fury.

“Prepare my horse,” he yelled. “I'm going to avenge brother!”

His father couldn't stop him. In full armor, he took his swords, mounted, and rode to the front fort.

“You mustn't underestimate the enemy,” Shi Wengong warned him. “Song Jiang has many intelligent bold officers. In my humble opinion we should continue holding our five forts while secretly dispatching an emissary to Lingzhou to request that the throne be petitioned immediately for a relief army. One half of it should be sent to attack Mount Liangshan, the other to defend Zengtou. That will take the heart out of the bandits. Their only

thought will be to rush back to their stronghold. Then, though I am a person of no talent, I shall be glad to join with you and your brothers in pursuing and exterminating the brigands. We're sure to attain great distinction."

Before he had finished speaking, assistant instructor Su Ding arrived from the north fort. He agreed with Shi's proposal. "That scoundrel Wu Yong is full of tricks," he said. "He mustn't be considered lightly. Defense is the best course. When the relief army arrives, we can discuss long-range plans again."

"They killed my brother," Zeng Sheng shouted. "He must be avenged! Why should we wait! Delay will only give the enemy time to gather strength and make them harder to defeat!"

Neither Shi nor Su could dissuade him. Zeng Sheng mounted and, with a few dozen horsemen, flew from the fort to challenge the foe.

Song Jiang was notified. He instructed the advance force to give battle. Qin Ming, on receiving the order, started to go out, brandishing his wolf-toothed cudgel, against Zeng Sheng. But suddenly Li Kui, axes in hand, rushed forward without a word to anyone and occupied the center of the arena.

One of the enemy recognized him. "That's Li Kui the Black Whirlwind," he said.

Zeng Sheng directed his archers to shoot. Ordinarily, Li Kui went naked into combat, and he relied on the shields of Xiang Chong and Li Gun for cover. But this time he rushed out alone, and an arrow struck him in the leg. He fell like a collapsing Mount Taishan. The horsemen behind Zeng Sheng galloped forward to seize him, while Qin Ming and Hua Rong raced from the opposite side, followed by Ma Lin, Deng Fei, Lu Fang and Guo Sheng. Since Song Jiang's men outnumbered him, Zeng Sheng was afraid to continue the engagement. He and his soldiers returned to the fort. Song Jiang called his forces back to camp.

The next day, Shi Wengong and Su Ding opposed any further combat.

But they had no affect on Zeng Sheng. “Brother must be avenged,” he insisted. Shi had no choice but to don his armor and mount. His horse was the famous White Jade Lion That Glows in the Night which he had taken forcibly from Duan Jingzhu. Song Jiang rode out with his chieftains to meet him.

Shi raced fiercely towards them. Qin Ming, eager for first honors, flew forward. The animals met and weapons clashed. After twenty rounds Qin Ming faltered, and he rode back towards his original position. Shi, pursuing, thrust with his lance. He hit Qin Ming in the leg, and the Thunderbolt fell from his saddle. Lu Fang, Guo Sheng, Ma Lin and Deng Fei raced to his defense. Although they managed to rescue Qin Ming, the enemy inflicted casualties. They withdrew and made camp ten *li* from the fort.

Song Jiang ordered a cart for the Thunderbolt and had him escorted back to the mountain fortress to rest. Then he conferred with Wu Yong. They sent word to the stronghold for Guan Sheng the Big Halberd, Xu Ning the Metal Lancer, Shan Tinggui and Wei Dingguo to come and lend a hand.

Song Jiang burned incense and prayed, and cast divining sticks. Wu Yong looked at the omens and said: “Since this place is penetrable, enemy soldiers will surely slip into camp tonight.”

“We'd better prepare, then.”

“Don't let it trouble you, brother. Simply order the chieftains of three camps to combine them into two, one east, one west, and place Xie Zhen on the left and Xie Bao on the right of this one. Let the remainder conceal themselves in ambush on all sides.”

This was done. That night, the sky was clear and the moon was bright. There was no wind or clouds.

Shi Wengong, in his fort, said to Zeng Sheng: “The bandits today lost two commanders. They must be frightened and depressed. This would be a good time to raid their camp.”

Zeng Sheng immediately ordered Su Ding in the north fort, Zeng Mi in the south, and Zeng Suo in the west, to come at once with their soldiers and join in the attack. Around the second watch, they stealthily posted pickets, removed the bells from their horses and the clanking armor from the men, and crept into Song Jiang's central camp. No one was in sight. The camp was empty.

Realizing they'd been tricked, they turned to beat a hasty retreat. But from the left came Two-Headed Snake Xie Zhen and from the right came Twin Tailed Scorpion Xie Bao, with Hua Rong appearing in the rear, and all closed in together. In the darkness, Zeng Suo was skewered by Xie Zhen's steel trident, and tumbled dead to the ground.

Torches were applied to Shi's fort to the rear and wild shouts rose as outlaw troops smashed into the stockade from the east and the west. A savage melee raged through half the night. Shi Wengong clawed out an escape route and fled.

Zeng Senior's agitation doubled on learning of the death of his son Suo. The next day he asked Shi to write a letter of surrender. The instructor, who was also very frightened, did so, and dispatched it by emissary to Song Jiang's camp. Song Jiang opened it and read:

Zeng Nong, lord of Zengtou Village, bows his head and respectfully greets Song Jiang, commander-in-chief. My sons in a moment of rashness wrongly offended your prestige. When Chao Gai the Heavenly King came with troops and reasonably demanded our submission, one of my underlings dared to snipe at him with bow and arrow. We also criminally stole your horses. There aren't words enough to express my apologies. All of this was against my wishes.

Now that dog of a son is dead, and I sent this emissary to request peace. If you will end the fighting and retire your troops, I will return all of your horses and highly reward your forces with gold and cloth. It is my sincere desire to avoid casualties on both sides. I pray you give this matter your consideration.

By the time he finished reading, Song Jiang was in a rage. “He killed my brother Chao Gai,” he fumed. '“Why should I quit! I'll raze that village to the ground!”

The emissary, lying prostrate, trembled uncontrollably. Wu Yong hastily intervened.

“You're wrong, brother,” he said. “We contended with them because they abused us. But now they are asking for peace. Can we abandon principle because of a moment of anger?”

A reply was written and ten ounces of silver given to the emissary who returned to the village. Zeng Senior and Shi Wengong opened the missive and read:

Song Jiang, commander-in-chief of Mount Liangshan, sets his hand in reply to Zeng Nong, lord of Zengtou: Since ancient times a country without credibility must perish, a man without virtue must die, wealth gained without rectitude must be confiscated, generals without courage must suffer defeat. Originally there was no enmity between Liangshan Marsh and Zengtou Village. Each stayed within its own boundaries. But your evil deeds aroused our hostility. If you seek peace you must return the horses you stole on two occasions, turn over the thief Yu Baosi; and reward our soldiers with money and cloth. Let your generosity demonstrate your sincerity. If you change your mind, we shall have to take other measures.

Zeng Nong and Shi were both shocked and depressed. The next day Zeng Nong dispatched an emissary with another message: “If you want Yu Baosi, please send a man as hostage.”

Song Jiang and Wu Yong dispatched Shi Qian, Li Kui, Fan Rui, Xiang Chong and Li Gun as an earnest of a desire for negotiations. Just before they left, they were told what to do in the event of an emergency, and urged to act promptly. The five departed.

Guan Sheng, Xu Ning, Shan Tinggui and Wei Tingguo arrived from the mountain stronghold. After a reunion with the other chieftains they were stationed in the central column.

Meanwhile, Shi Qian and the four bold fellows met with Zeng Senior. “Big Brother has ordered us here to discuss peace,” said Flea on a Drum.

“If Wu Yong sends five men he must be up to some trick,” said Shi Wengong.

Li Kui angrily grabbed Shi and commenced to beat him. Zeng Senior hurriedly intervened.

Shi Qian said: “Li Kui may be crude, but he has Big Brother's fullest trust. He was specially chosen. You have no need for suspicion.”

Zeng Senior was very anxious for peace. Ignoring Shi, he served the five wine and invited them to rest in the camp in the Fahua Monastery, and posted a guard of five hundred soldiers front and rear. He then appointed his son Zeng Sheng his negotiator and sent him to Song Jiang's camp with Yu Baosi.

After presenting themselves at the central column, they delivered the horses they had stolen, plus a quantity of gold and bolts of cloth.

“These are the latest horses you rustled,” said Song Jiang. “Where is White Jade Lion That Glows in the Night that you snatched from Duan Jiangzhu the previous time?”

“My instructor Shi Wengong has been riding it,” said Zeng Sheng. “That's why we didn't bring it.”

“You hurry up and write a letter, and say I want that horse back, quickly!”

Zeng Sheng penned a missive and sent a man with it to the fort. When Shi was informed, he said: “Any other horse he can have, but not this one!”

Several times the messenger shuttled back and forth. Song Jiang absolutely insisted. Finally, Shi dispatched a reply.

“If he really must have my horse, let him withdraw his army first, and I'll give it to him.”

Song Jiang went into a huddle with Wu Yong. While they were conferring a man suddenly arrived and reported: “Armies from Qingzhou and Lingzhou are on their way!”

“When those rascals in Zengtou hear about this, they're sure to pull a switch!” Song Jiang averred.

He secretly ordered Guan Sheng, Shan and Wei to engage the Qingzhou army, and Hua Rong, Ma Lin and Deng Fei to engage the forces from Lingzhou. He also summoned Yu Baosi privately, reassured him and treated him with great kindness.

“If you're willing to perform meritoriously, I'll make you a chieftain in our mountain stronghold,” said Song Jiang. “Vengeance against you for stealing our horses will be forgotten. I'll break an arrow in pledge. If you won't co-operate, Zengtou will soon be destroyed. It's up to you.” Yu decided to give in and accept orders. Wu Yong told him of his plan.

“Pretend to have escaped and run back to your fort. Say to Shi Wengong: 'I was in Song Jiang's camp with Zeng Sheng, negotiating peace. From what I heard, I now have the true picture. Song Jiang's only purpose is to get back his Fine horse. He's not interested in peace. Once you return the animal, he's going to turn on us. He's heard that relief armies are on the way from Qingzhou and Lingzhou, and he's in a terrible flap. You must take advantage of this situation and act. It's too good to miss.' If Shi heeds your advice, we'll be ready for him.”

Yu went to Shi's fort and spoke as directed. Shi led him to Zeng Senior and said that Song Jiang had no intention of making peace, and that this was a good time to attack his camp.

“But Sheng is there,” the father protested. “If we change, they're sure to kill him.”

“We'll smash into the camp and rescue him, come what may. Tonight we'll order all of our forts to muster their full complement of men and go with us against Song Jiang's camp. Once we cut off the snake's head its body—the rest of the bandits—will be immobilized. When we return there will be time enough to kill Li Kui and the other four.”

“An excellent plan, instructor.”

Su Ding in the north fort, Zeng Kui in the east fort and Zeng Mi in the south fort were notified to join in the raid. Yu managed to slip into the fort in the Fahua Monastery and see Li Kui and the others. He surreptitiously told Shi Qian what was going on.

Meanwhile, Song Jiang said to Wu Yong: “I wonder how our plan is working out?”

“If Yu doesn't come back, that means they've fallen for it,” said the military advisor. “Tonight, they'll probably raid our camp. We'll pull out, first, and lie in ambush on both sides. At the same time we'll send Sagacious Lu and Wu Song with foot soldiers against their east fort, and infantry under Zhu Tong and Lei Heng against their west fort, while Yang Zhi and Shi Jin attack the north fort with cavalry. This method is called 'The Foreign Hunting Dog Waits for the Quarry in Its Den'. It never fails.”

That night Shi Wengong set out with Su Ding, Zeng Mi, Zeng Kui and their soldiers. The moon was hazy, the stars were dim. Shi and Su were in the lead, Mi and Kui covered the rear. Bells had been removed from the horses and clanking armor from the men. All advanced quietly towards Song Jiang's camp.

They found the gates open and not a soul inside. It was completely still. The raiders knew they had been duped, and quickly departed. As they hurried back towards their fort they heard gongs clashing and cannon booming in Zengtou. Shi Qian, who had climbed into the bell tower of Fahua Monastery, had clangorously tolled the big bell. This was the signal for outlaw artillery to open fire on the East and West Gates of the village. With a roar, countless brigands poured through the blasted portals, slaughtering

as they came. In the monastery, Li Kui, Fan Rui, Xiang Chong and Li Gun vigorously fought their way out.

Shi was anxious to return to the fort, but he couldn't find the road. The fort itself was a scene of mad confusion. Zeng Senior, on being informed that the men of Liangshan Marsh were charging murderously in from two directions, hung himself in despair.

Zeng Mi, hastening to the west fort, died from a thrust of Zhu Tong's halberd. Zeng Kui, fleeing to the east fort, was trampled to jelly in the chaos by horses' hoofs.

Pursued by Sagacious Lu and Wu Song, Su Ding rushed pell-mell through the North Gate, outside of which were innumerable concealed pits. He ran into Yang Zhi and Shi Jin, who killed him with arrows. The men and horses fleeing in his wake tumbled one on top the other into the pits, countless numbers dying in their fall.

Shi Wengong's White Jade Lion steed was fleet. He galloped through the West Gate into the wilderness. A black mist curtained the sky. Shi couldn't tell north from south. He rode on for twenty *li,* not knowing where he was.

A gong crashed in a wood and four or five hundred troops surged out. The commander at their head held a long staff, which he swung at the legs of Shi's mount. The magnificent stallion, before the blow could land, leaped over its attacker's head and galloped on.

Shi continued to race through the night. Dark clouds massed, chill vapors floated, a black mist spread, a fierce wind blew. In the emptiness, wherever he turned he was dogged by Chao Gai's spirit. Shi resumed his original road, and he ran into Yan Qing the Prodigy and Lu Junyi the Magnate.

“Where do you think you're going, wretched thief!” shouted Lu. With one thrust of the halberd into Shi's leg, he brought him from his saddle. Lu tied him up and marched him to Zengtou. Yan Qing led the famous steed to the main camp.

Song Jiang was both delighted and angry. While glad that Lu Junyi had distinguished himself, he was enraged to see Shi Wengong, who had slain Chao Gai the Heavenly King.

First he had Zeng Sheng decapitated and every member of the Zeng family slaughtered, old and young, without exception. Then he stripped the village of all gold, silver, valuables and grain and loaded them onto carts for delivery to the mountain stronghold, where they would be distributed as rewards among the chieftains and troops.

Meanwhile, Guan Sheng drove off the army from Qingzhou, and Hua Rong scattered the soldiers from Lingzhou, and they and their forces returned to the village. Not a chieftain, big or small, had been lost, and Song Jiang had regained the White Jade Lion That Glows in the Night, to say nothing of large quantities of booty.

Shi Wengong was locked in a cage cart, the outlaw troops were assembled, and all headed back for Mount Liangshan. None of the towns, villages or hamlets en route were molested.

On arriving at Loyalty Hall, they gathered before Chao Gai's spirit tablet. Xiao Rang the Master Hand, at Song Jiang's direction, wrote the memorial address. The chieftains wore mourning and wept. Shi Wengong's heart was cut out and offered as a sacrifice to the departed. The ceremony was completed.

Song Jiang then discussed with the chieftains the question of Chao Gai's successor.

“You, brother, should be the supreme leader, with Lu Junyi the Magnate as second in command,” said Wu Yong. “The remaining brothers should retain their original ranks.”

“Don't you remember Chao Gai's dying wish? 'Let whoever captures Shi Wengong become the ruler of Liangshan Marsh.' Today, Lu Junyi caught the knave and brought him up the mountain as a sacrifice to brother Chao Cai. Vengeance has been attained. It is only proper that he command. There's no need for a lot of talk.”

“I'm lacking in both virtue and talent,” Lu protested. “I wouldn't dare to assume such a position. Even if I were given the lowest rank, it would be too much.”

“I don't mean to be overly modest,” said Song Jiang, “but in three respects I am your inferior. First, I'm short and swarthy, ugly and incompetent, while you are handsome, stalwart, and of noble men. Second, I was only a petty functionary who committed a crime and had to flee. Because these brothers didn't scorn me, I was allowed to rule temporarily. But you are the son of a powerful family, and renowned for gallantry. Although you were in a bit of danger for a while, Heaven has defended you, and you're now out of trouble. Third, I can neither maintain stability in civil affairs nor win the support of troops in military matters. I haven't the strength to strangle a chicken, or draw a bow as much as an inch, whereas you can deal with a thousand enemies at once. You understand the present and are learned in the past. There's no one who doesn't concede your superiority. Because of your talent and virtue it is entirely fitting that you be the ruler of our mountain stronghold. Later, when you return to the service of the emperor and through merit build your career, you surely will become a high official, and we brothers will bask in your reflected glory. My mind is made up. You mustn't refuse any longer.”

Lu Junyi respectfully and humbly kowtowed. “Brother, say no more,” he begged. “Even if I die for it, I cannot accede to your order!”

“Remain as leader, let Lu be second in command,” Wu Yong urged, “and everyone will be satisfied. You'll chill our men's hearts if you keep on relinquishing like this!” He had already noted the expressions on the faces of the others before making this statement.

Li Kui the Black Whirlwind raised his voice loudly: “I risked my life at Jiangzhou to come here with you. We've given you your way in everything. I'm not afraid of Heaven itself, so I ask you: Why do you keep trying to give up the friggin command? I'll start killing again! We can dissolve the gang!”

Wu Song also took Wu Yong's hint. “There are many high military officers under you, brother,” he said, “who once took their orders from the emperor.

They'll listen to you, but not to anyone else.”

Liu Tang said; “There were seven of us when we first came up the mountain. It was our intention then to make you our leader. We couldn't serve another now.”

“If you give up command, brother,” Sagacious Lu shouted, “I say we should pack it in and each go his separate way!”

“Enough,” Song Jiang cried. “I have a method. Whatever is Heaven's will, we'll act accordingly.”

“What is your proposal,” said Wu Yong. “Please tell us.”

“It involves two matters,” said Song Jiang.

And because of these, two heroes were added to Mount Liangshan, and the district town of Dongping was stricken by calamity. The stars of Heavenly Spirits joined in loyal righteousness, and in Liangshan Marsh the stars of Earthly Fiends gathered.

What were the two matters of which Song Jiang spoke? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 69
Nine Dragons Shi Jin Is Trapped in Dongping Prefecture
Song Jiang Chivalrously Releases General Two Spears

“We're short of money and grain,” Song Jiang said to the assembled chieftains, “but to the east of here are two prefectural towns where they have both. One is Dongping, the other is Dongchang. While we've never disturbed their people, when we asked them to lend us some grain, they flatly refused. I'm going to have the names of these towns written on separate slips of paper. Lu Junyi and I will each draw one. Whoever first conquers his town will become the ruler of Liangshan Marsh. Agreed?”

“Good,” said Wu Yong. “We'll abide by Heaven's will.”

“Don't talk like that,” said Lu. “Big Brother must remain as leader. Otherwise I won't accept the mission.”

But Lu was over-ruled. Ironclad Virtue Pei Xuan wrote out the slips. Prayers were offered and incense burned. Then the drawing was made. Song Jiang picked Dongping, Lu got Dongchang. All of the chieftains were satisfied.

That day a feast was laid. While they were drinking wine, Song Jiang announced the disposition of the forces to be used in the attacks. His own command would consist of twenty-five chieftains including himself. They would lead an army of ten thousand infantry and cavalry. The three Ruan brothers—Second, Fifth and Seventh, would support them with a naval flotilla.

Under Lu Junyi would be another twenty-four chieftains. They too would command an army of combined infantry and cavalry numbering ten thousand, and would be supported by a naval flotilla under Li Jun, Tong Wei and Tong Meng.

The other chieftains, and those convalescing from wounds, would remain to guard the fortress. The dispositions having been made, the two armies set forth against the prefectural towns.

It was the first day of the third lunar month. The days were warm, the wind mild, the grass green, the turf soft—perfect conditions for battle.

We'll speak First of Song Jiang, as he marched on Dongping, Forty *li* from the town, he and his forces came to a village called Anshan, and there made camp.

“Cheng Wanli the governor of Dongping and his district military commander are both natives of Shangdang County, east of the river. The commander's name is Dong Ping. Because he's skilled with a pair of spears, he's known to everyone as General Two Spears. He has the courage often thousand,” said Song Jiang. “Although we're going to attack his town, we should treat him courteously. I want to dispatch two men with a written declaration of war. I shall urge him to surrender and avoid a battle. If he refuses, no one will be able to blame us for the carnage. Who dares to deliver my message?”

A man stepped forward. He was Yu Baosi. “I know Dong Ping by sight,” he said. “I'll be glad to deliver the declaration.”

Another man emerged from the ranks of the chieftains. His name was Wang Dingliu. “I haven't proven my mettle to the stronghold yet,” he said, “and so I'd like to go with him on this mission.”

Song Jiang was very pleased. He wrote his letter and gave it to the two volunteers. It stated only a request for grain.

When Governor Cheng of Dongping heard that an army under Song Jiang was camped in Anshan, he summoned his district commander, General Two Spears to discuss the military situation. Just as they had sat down, the gate-keeper entered and said: “Messengers from Song Jiang are here with a declaration of war.”

Cheng directed that they be allowed in. Yu and Wang entered and presented the letter. Cheng read it. He turned to the general.

“They're demanding money and grain. What shall we do?”

The general was furious. He shouted for the emissaries to be taken out and decapitated. Cheng intervened.

“No! Since ancient times messengers between hostile states have never been killed. It would be highly improper. Let them each be beaten twenty strokes and sent back. We'll see what Song Jiang does next.”

But the general was still fuming. He had the two bound and beaten till their skin split and their flesh burst asunder, and then had them driven from the town.

They returned to the camp, weeping. “That lout of a general has no sense of fitness,” they complained. “He holds our fortress in contempt.”

Anger filled Song Jiang's breast. He longed to level the town immediately. He instructed Yu and Wang to return to the stronghold and rest. Nine Dragons Shi Jin rose and said:

“I used to live in Dongping and was sweet on a girl in a pleasure house there. Her name is Li Shuilan. We were having a really warm affair. If I take some gold and silver and slip into town, I can stay in her house. I'll set a time, Big Brother, and you can attack. As soon as General Two Spears goes out to fight, I'll climb up into the Drum Tower and start a fire. Operating from within and without, we'll win a big victory.”

“Excellent,” cried Song Jiang.

Shi Jin put some gold and silver in a bundle, concealed a weapon on his person, and bid a respectful farewell.

“I won't move my troops, brother, until you pick an appropriate moment,” Song Jiang informed him.

Nine Dragons entered the town and went directly to the home of Li Shuilan in the western pleasure house district. The pander of the establishment was startled to see him. He led Shi Jin inside and called the girl. Shuilan escorted Shi Jin upstairs and they sat down.

“I haven't seen so much as your shadow in ages. How come?” she queried. “I hear you're a big chieftain in Liangshan Marsh now. There's a notice out for your arrest. The last couple of days the streets have been buzzing with talk that Song Jiang is going to raid the town for grain. What are you doing here, anyway?”

“The truth is I am a chieftain on Mount Liangshan, but I haven't distinguished myself yet. Big Brother plans to attack the town for grain, all right. I told him about your place and he sent me here to spy. I've brought you some gold and silver. You're not to breathe a word. After this is over, I'll take you and your family up the mountain, and we'll be happy.”

Shuilan glibly promised to do everything he asked. She accepted the money and served him food and drink. But later she discussed it with the bawd who was the pander's wife.

“When he was a regular caller, he was a good person,” the girl said. “His coming here didn't matter. But now he's gone bad. If there's trouble, it won't be any joke for us.”

“It's dangerous to provoke those bold fellows of Song Jiang in Liangshan Marsh,” the pander cautioned. “They can take any town they like. When they break in here, they'll wreck everything. They'll go hard on us if we don't keep our word.”

“Old idiot,” his wife the bawd swore. “You're just ignorant! If there's a wasp in your bosom, pluck it out, as the old saying goes. Informants are never prosecuted—that's the universal rule. Go to the district court, quick, and inform on Shi Jin. Let them take him. Then, whatever happens, we won't be involved.”

“He's brought us a lot of money,” the pander said hesitantly. “What's the point of it if we don't do anything for him?”

“Animal,” his wife exclaimed. “Your words are just farts! We bawds have harmed thousands! What's one more? If you don't inform on him I'll go down there myself and cry for justice—against you, as well!”

“Control yourself,” urged the pander. “Tell Shuilan to hang on to him. We don't want to stir the grass and alarm the snake. He mustn't get away. I'll report to the police first, and let them nab him. Then I'll inform the court.”

Shuilan went back upstairs. Shi Jin was struck by her alternating flushes and pallor.

“Is anything wrong? Why do you look so frightened?”

“I missed my step on the stairs and nearly fell. My heart's all aflutter.”

Suddenly they heard footsteps running up the stairs and shouts outside the window. Dozens of policemen burst into the room. They hustled Shi Jin like a bound lion down the stairs, and rushed him to the district court of Dongping.

“You impudent scoundrel,” shouted the governor. “How dare you come here to spy? If Li Shuilan's protector hadn't informed, you might have caused severe damage to our citizenry? Tell us the whole story, quickly! What did Song Jiang send you to find out?”

Shi Jin didn't speak.

“Rogues like that never talk unless you clout them,” growled the general.

“Police and jailors, beat the villain,” shouted Governor Cheng.

Shi Jin's captors spewed cold water on him, then struck him a hundred blows with big rods on each leg. He endured it, and didn't say a word.

“Put a heavy rack on the lout and put him in the cell for the condemned,” said General Two Spears. “When we catch Song Jiang we'll deliver them both to the Eastern Capital for punishment!”

To return to Song Jiang. After Shi Jin left, he wrote a letter to Wu Yong saying that Shi Jin had gone to the home of Li Shuilan the doxy to spy. The military advisor was shocked. He hastily conferred with Lu Junyi and hurried to Song Jiang that same night.

“Who told Shi Jin to go?” he demanded.

“It was his own idea. He said that the girl had been his mistress, that they were very close.”

“You've made a mistake, brother. If I were here, I never would have agreed. Courtesans become intimate quickly, but they like new things and tire of the old. They've harmed countless talented men. They're as unstable as water. Even if she felt some genuine affection for him, she'd have a hard time going against her procuress. Shi Jin is sure to have come to grief.”

Song Jiang asked what they could do about it. Wu Yong summoned Mistress Gu and gave her instructions.

“We must trouble you to go into Dongping. Disguise yourself as a poor beggar woman and slip into town. If anything's stirring, report back at once. If Shi Jin is in prison, approach one of the jailors and say you want to bring him some food, for the sake of past kindness. After you get inside, tell Shi Jin secretly. 'We're breaking into town the last day of the month around dusk. During the excitement, find a way to get yourself free.' The night of the last day of the month, you, Mistress Gu, start a fire as a signal. That's when we'll launch our raid.”

Wu Yong turned to Song Jiang. “First, you must attack the county town of Wenshang, brother. The people are bound to flee to Dongping. Mistress Gu can mingle with the refugees and go in with them. No one will recognize her.”

The military advisor mounted his horse and returned to Dongchang.

Song Jiang mustered five hundred men and sent them against Wenshang, under Xie Zhen and Xie Bao. Sure enough, the residents, supporting the old

and carrying the young, scurried to Dongping to escape the battle. The town was thrown into confusion.

Mistress Gu, her hair dishevelled, her clothes in tatters, mingled with the crowds and entered the town. She begged along the streets until she came to the prefectural government compound. Her queries revealed that Shi Jin was indeed in prison.

The next day, carrying a jug of rice, she walked back and forth in front of the prison, waiting. Finally, an elderly policeman came out. She dropped to her knees and kowtowed, her tears falling like rain.

“What are you crying about, woman?”

“My former master Shi Jin is in there. It's been ten years since he left us. I heard only that he was travelling around as a merchant. I can't imagine what he's doing in jail. Nobody's sending him anything to eat, so I want to bring him this mouthful of food I've begged. Have pity, brother. Take me in. You'll be performing a greater blessing than building a seven-story pagoda.”

“He's a bandit from Liangshan Marsh, and he's committed a capital offense. No one would dare to take you in there.”

“He must accept what he deserves, even if it's death by slow slicing. But have pity on an old woman who only wants to deliver a mouthful of food for the sake of kindness in the past.” Again Mistress Gu wept.

The old policeman thought to himself: “If it were a man, I couldn't do it. But what harm is there in a woman?” He led Mistress Gu into the prison where she found Shi Jin wearing a heavy rack on his neck, and iron chains around his waist.

Nine Dragons was amazed to see her, but he remained silent. Mistress Gu pretended to weep and sob as she fed him from the jug. Jailors hastened towards them.

“That's a condemned evil-doer,” they shouted. “Not even the wind gets in here. Who let you bring him food? Get out, quick, and save yourself a

beating!”

There were too many people around. She couldn't say much, but only had time to whisper: “We're breaking into the town the last night of the month. Fight to free yourself.”

Before Shi Jin could ask her what time of the night, the jailors drove her with blows out of the prison door. He remembered only “last night of the month.”

It happened that the third lunar month had thirty days that year, instead the usual twenty-nine. But when Shi Jin asked one of the jailors, “What's the date?” the man remembered wrongly and said: “The last day of the month. I must buy some spirit paper to burn for the wandering souls.”

Shi Jin could scarcely wait. Near evening, he got one of the keepers, who was half drunk, to take him to the latrine.

“Who's that behind you?” Shi Jin suddenly exclaimed.

As the man turned, Shi Jin wrenched open the rack and struck him on the forehead with a corner of it, knocking him to the ground. With a brick Shi Jin smashed the wooden fetters on his feet. Falcon eyes glaring, he charged into the central pavilion, where several policemen were sodden with drink. He killed a few, the others fled.

Nine Dragons opened the prison gate, in anticipation of rescue from the outside. He released all the inmates, about fifty or sixty men. They came cheering out of their cells.

When the situation was reported to Governor Cheng, his face turned an earthen hue. Hastily, he sent for his district commander.

“There must be an enemy spy in town,” General Two Spears averred. “Dispatch guards at once to surround the scoundrel! I'll seize this opportunity to lead troops out and capture Song Jiang. Defend the town well, Excellency. Send a dozen men to hold the prison gate. Let no one escape!”

The general mounted, mustered his troops and set forth. Cheng formed a force of keepers and guards, armed with spears and staves, and dispatched them to prison gate, where they stood, shouting. While Shi Jin didn't dare to come out, neither did they have the courage to go in. Mistress Gu could only bemoan the miscarriage of the plan.

General Two Spears, sallying out with his infantry and cavalry at the fourth watch, raced murderously towards Song Jiang's camp. A scout reported their approach.

“Mistress Gu must have run into trouble,” Song Jiang said. “Now the foe is attacking. We'll give them a hot welcome!” He ordered his army to get ready.

By dawn the contending hosts were deployed in battle positions. General Two Spears Dong Ping rode forward.

Clever and ingenious, he was a man of considerable accomplishments. There were few skills he hadn't mastered, including the playing of string instrument* and bamboo flutes. Throughout Shandong and Hebei he was famed as the dashing General Two Spears.

He cut a fine figure, and Song Jiang was filled with admiration. Attached to the General's arrow quiver was a pennant reading: *Heroic General Two Spears, noble lord often thousand families.* Song Jiang ordered Han Tao to joust with him.

Han Tao's weapon was a long lance. Grasping it firmly, he cantered towards Dong Ping. The General wielded his two spears with dazzling artistry. Han Tao was unable to cope.

Song Jiang next ordered Xu Ning the Metal Lancer into battle with his hooked weapon to replace Han Tao. Xu Ning at once galloped forward and locked Dong Ping in fierce combat. They fought desperately in a cloud of dust for over fifty rounds, with neither emerging the victor.

It was lasting too long. Song Jiang was afraid Xu Ning would lose. He had the trumpeter sound retreat, and Xu Ning turned his steed and rode back.

General Two Spears closely pursued him right into the midst of the outlaws' position. Song Jiang waved his whip, and from all sides his troops closed in.

He rode to the top of a bluff and watched Dong Ping, surrounded by the outlaws. When the General headed east, Song pointed east with his pennant and the troops moved east and cut him off. When he tried to go west, Song pointed west with his pennant, and the troops shifted west and blocked him again.

Dashing first one way, then another, General Two Spears fought until late afternoon, when he finally broke through. Song Jiang did not give chase.

It was clear by then to Dong Ping that he could not wrest victory. He withdrew his forces into the town that same evening. Song Jiang moved his army up during the night and surrounded the walls. Inside the town Mistress Gu dared not light a signal fire and Shi Jin was unable to come out. Both were stalemated.

Now, Governor Cheng had a daughter of exceptional beauty, and Dong Ping, who was unmarried, had frequently sent intermediaries to plead his suit. But Cheng would not consent. As a result, there was some hostility between the two men, though they spoke to each other pleasantly enough. The morning after Dong returned to the town with his soldiers, he again sent a spokesman to press for the girl's hand.

“I'm a civil and he's a military official. Such a marriage would be ideal,” said Cheng. “But I'd be a laughing stock if I consented now, with bandits at our gates and the situation so dangerous. Let's wait until we've driven them off and the safety of town preserved. It won't be too late then to talk about marriage.”

The spokesman reported Cheng's reply. “Well put,” said Dong, but in his heart he was very annoyed. He wasn't at all sure Cheng would agree later on.

Song Jiang, after arriving during the night, was intensifying his attack. The governor requested Dong Ping to go out and fight. Angrily, General Two

Spears donned his armor and mounted. With three armies he marched from the town.

Beneath an arch of pennants on the field of battle, Song Jiang shouted: “How dare you, a lone general, oppose me? I've a hundred thousand men under me and thousands of able commanders, all united in carrying out Heaven's will to succor the needy and rescue the endangered! Better surrender now and avoid being killed!”

“Little clerk with the criminal tattoo on his cheek, death-deserving rogue,” Dong fumed, “you're raving mad!”

Spears in hand, he galloped towards Song Jiang. From the left of his target Lin Chong and, from the right Hua Rong, rode out to meet him, each of them armed. They fought several rounds, then the two chieftains withdrew, while the outlaw army beat a confused retreat, as if already vanquished. Dong clapped his horse and courageously pursued.

Song Jiang pulled back to the border of Shouchun County, with General Two Spears closely following. When they were about a dozen *li* from the county seat, they came to a village. The post road running through its center was lined by thatched huts. Dong, racing after them on his horse, didn't know it was a trap. Out of healthy respect for Dong's power as a warrior, the night before Song had placed Stumpy Tiger Wang, Ten Feet of Steel, Zhang Qing, Sun the Witch and over a hundred men in ambush in the huts. They had laid ropes across the road and covered them with earth. At the sound of a gong, they were to raise and pull them taut, trip the steed, and catch the general.

When Dong reached the stretch of road, he heard Kong Ming and Kong Liang shout behind him: “Don't harm our ruler!” A gong crashed in front of the huts, the doors flew open, and ropes sprang up athward the road. As Dong's horse turned, more ropes rose behind it. Down went the animal and its rider. From the left Stumpy Tiger and Ten Feet of Steel leaped out, from the right Zhang Qing and Sun the Witch. Together they seized Dong and stripped him of his helmet, armor and spears, and removed his horse. The two women generals bound his hands behind him and, each bearing swords, led him under guard to meet Song Jiang.

Song Jiang, who had gone past the thatched huts, reined in beneath a leafy poplar and watched the two women chieftains approaching with their prisoner.

“I instructed you to invite General Dong Ping here,” he shouted. “Who told you to tie him!”

The two murmured apologies and withdrew, as Song Jiang hastily dismounted and removed Dong's bonds. He took off his own armor and robe and gave them to the general to wear, prostrated himself and kowtowed. Dong hurriedly returned the courtesy.

“If you don't scorn us as too lowly, General,” said Song Jiang, “please be the ruler of our mountain stronghold.”

“I am your prisoner. Even death would be too light a punishment. If you are willing to spare me, I will consider myself infinitely fortunate!”

“Recently, we've run short of grain, and so we requested Dongping Prefecture to lend us some. We had nothing else in mind.”

“That lout Cheng was once just a tutor in the house of Lord Tong Guan. Now he uses his high position to oppress the populace. If you'll allow me, brother, I'll fool them into opening the gates. You can charge in and take their money and grain as my thanks for your kindness.”

Song Jiang was delighted. He ordered that Dong's possessions be returned. General Two Spears put on his armor and mounted. He rode back to Dongping Town, followed by the outlaw army, its banners and pennants rolled.

“You, on the walls,” shouted Dong. “Open the gates!”

The soldiers above the gates brought torches and, in their light, recognized the district commander. They opened the big gates and lowered the drawbridge. Dong rode over and smashed the iron lock. Song Jiang and his army surged into the town.

They went directly to the prefectural government compound. An order was quickly transmitted that none of the ordinary people were to be killed, or their homes burned. Dong burst into Cheng's residency, slaughtered the governor and his entire household and took the daughter. At Song Jiang's direction, the prison was opened and Shi Jin rescued.

Song Jiang then looted the treasury of its gold and silver and valuables, and had grain from the government granary loaded onto carts, with instructions that it be delivered to the Shore of Golden Sands for the three Ruan brothers to take up the mountain.

Shi Jin led a party to the home of Li Shuilan in the western pleasure section. He hacked her, and her pander and bawd, to pieces.

Song Jiang distributed Cheng's private possessions among the populace and put up proclamations which read: “We have executed the tyrannical governor. Good citizens go about your business in peace.” He then withdrew his army.

Bai Sheng the Daylight Rat hurried towards the chieftains when they reached the town of Anshan. He told of a battle in the district of Dongchang. Song Jiang frowned, and his eyes grew large with anger.

“Brothers,” he cried, “we won't return to the mountain. Come with me!”

Truly, the heroes of the Marsh in powerful assault marched again on Dongchang, a town of lavish and elegant riches.

Were Song Jiang and his army able to effect a rescue? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 70
Featherless Arrow Assaults Heroes with Stones
Song Jiang Abandons Grain to Catch a Warrior

Bai Sheng said: “Lu Junyi has had two failures in a row in besieging Dongchang. The town is defended by a fierce general named Zhang Qin. He hails from Zhangte Prefecture and began his career in the cavalry. He

flings stones with remarkable accuracy, hitting the mark every time. People call him the Featherless Arrow. Under him are two commanders. One is Gong Wang the Flowery-Necked Tiger, so named because he had a tiger tattooed all over his body, with its head decorating his neck. He throws a spear while riding. The other is Ding Desun the Arrow-Struck Tiger. His face is scarred from his cheeks to his throat. He throws a trident while riding.

“Lu waited outside the town for ten days, but no one came forth to fight. A few days ago, Zhang Qin emerged and Hao Siwen fought him for many rounds. Zhang then withdrew and Hao gave chase. A stone hit Hao on the temple and knocked him from his saddle. Yan Qing managed to strike Zhang's horse with an arrow, and so we were able to save Hao's life. That was our first failure.

“The next day, Fan Rui the Demon King Who Roils the World rode forth with Xiang Chong and Li Gun, who brandished their shields. Unexpectedly, in an underhand pitch, Ding flung his trident and struck Xiang Chong. That was our second failure.

“Both men are nursing their wounds on one of our boats. Our general Lu Junyi has sent me here to request you to come to his aid.”

Song Jiang sighed. “How unlucky he is. I even dispatched Wu Yong and Gongsun Sheng to help him. I was sure he'd succeed in battle and thus gain face in our stronghold. Who'd have thought he'd meet his match'. But that being the case, I and my brothers will have to go to his rescue.”

He ordered the three armies to march. The chieftains mounted and went with Song Jiang to the outskirts of Dongchang. Lu met them and related what had transpired. Then all made camp.

While they were conferring, a junior officer entered and reported: “Zhang Qin the Featherless Arrow is challenging us to personal combat.”

Song Jiang and his chieftains rose and proceeded to a wide plain and deployed their troops. Three times the drums thundered, and Zhang Qin the Featherless Arrow rode forward. Back and forth, from one end of the line to

the other, he cantered, his animal's hoofs churning dust. Gong Wang the Flowery-Necked Tiger emerged abruptly from the left side of the enemy's arch of pennants. From the shadows on the right came the Arrow-Struck Tiger Ding Desun. The three rode onto the field of battle. Zhang Qin pointed at Song Jiang.

“Robber varlet of the swamp, I challenge a fight to the death!” Song Jiang asked his chieftains: “Who will contend with Zhang Qin?” Angrily aroused, one of the heroes beside him leaped into the saddle and galloped forward, brandishing a sickle-bladed lance. It was Xu Ning the Metal Lancer.

“Just the man!” thought Song Jiang approvingly. The two horses met, the two weapons vied. After less than five rounds Zhang Qin retreated. Xu Ning pursued. Featherless Arrow raised the lance in his left hand as if to thrust, while with his right he quietly extracted a stone from an embroidered pouch. Xu Ning was quite close. Zhang Qin suddenly twisted around and let fly with the stone. He hit poor Xu Ning squarely between the eyes, knocking him from his horse.

Gong Wang and Ding moved up to grab him. But Song Jiang's forces were many, and Lu Fang and Guo Sheng both rushed out with their crescent-bladed halberds and snatched the victim back to safety.

The shocked Song Jiang turned pale. “Who will take on that scoundrel?” he asked.

Before the-words were out of his mouth, from behind him a horse flew forward. It was Yan Shun who next contended. He fought many rounds, but there was no holding Zhang Qin, and Yan turned and withdrew. Zhang Qin, racing in pursuit, pulled out a stone and threw. It clanged against the back plate of Yan's armor. Bending low over his saddle, Zhang Qin cantered away.

“That wretch is nothing to be afraid of!” a voice among the outlaws shouted. And a chieftain clapped his steed and flew on to the field, holding a long lance. Han Tao the Ever-Victorious General engaged Zhang Qin without another word!

A mighty cheer went up as the horses met. Han Tao wanted to display his skill before Song Jiang. Concentration all his energies, he battled with Zhang Qin. But after less than ten rounds, Featherless Arrow withdrew. Han, wary of his stones, did not give chase. When Zhang looked back and saw he was not being followed, he wheeled his mount. Han Tao advanced with levelled lance. Zhang Qin stealthily extracted another stone. His hand rose and the missile struck Han Tao on the bridge of the nose. Blood streaming from the offended organ, Han fled back to his position.

Peng Qi was furious. Without waiting for Song Jiang's orders, waving a three-pointed, two-edged blade, he galloped towards Zhang Qin.

But before the two horses could meet, Featherless Arrow once more threw a stone concealed in his hand. Peng Qi was clunked on the forehead. He dropped his three-pointed, two-edged sword, and returned to the position in great haste.

One defeat after another. Panic gripped Song Jiang's heart. He was about to call a retreat. Then a mighty voice shouted from behind Lu Junyi the Magnate: “If our prestige is broken, how will we be able to fight in days to come? Let's see if those stones can hit me!”

It was Xuan Zan the Ugly Son-in-Law. He kicked up his horse and flew towards Zhang Qin, waving his blade.

“Singly come, singly go. Doubly come, flee in pairs,” cried Featherless Arrow. “Haven't you seen my trick with stones?”

“You've hit others,” retorted Xuan Zan, “but you'll never hit me!”

Even before he had finished speaking, Zhang Qin flung the stone in his hand. He struck Xuan Zan on the side of the mouth and tumbled him from his saddle. Gong Wang and Ding Desun advanced to seize him, but the outlaw forces, who outnumbered them, got there first and brought him back.

Song Jiang was consumed with rage. Sword in hand, he rent his gown and swore: “I'll either take Zhang Qin personally or I won't return to my army!”

Huyan Zhuo heard him make the vow. “What use are we brothers if you have to go forth yourself,” he exclaimed. Astride his Ebony Steed Which Treads in Snow, he rode onto the field and reviled Zhang Qin.

“Over-rated scamp! What have you got except a bit of strength and courage? Do you recognize the great warrior Huyan Zhuo?”

“Traitor and vanquished general! See what you can do with this!” Featherless Arrow sent a stone sizzling through the air.

Huyan hastily raised his rods to ward it off and it struck him a paralyzing blow on the wrist. Since he could no longer swing the steel rods he returned to his base.

“All of the cavalry chieftains have been wounded,” said Song Jiang. “Who of the infantry dares to capture Zhang Qin?”

Liu Tang, twirling his halberd, strode onto the field of battle. Zhang Qin laughed.

“Puny commander! I've beaten your cavalry. What good are footsloggers!”

Enraged, Liu Tang charged. Featherless Arrow turned his steed and cantered towards his position. Liu Tang raced after and caught up. With a swift hack, he struck the animal. It lashed out with its rear hoofs and switched its tail across Liu Tang's eyes, blinding him temporarily. A stone from Zhang Qin felled him to the ground. As he struggled to rise, government soldiers pounced on him and dragged him away.

“Who will rescue Liu Tang?” Song Jiang yelled.

Yang Zhi the Blue-Faced Beast, brandishing his halberd, rode out against Zhang Qin. Featherless Arrow feinted with his lance. Yang Zhi swung, Zhang Qin ducked down to his stirrups, and the blade struck empty air.

“Take that!” cried Zhang Qin, with a quick underhand toss.

The stone clanged against Yang Zhi's helmet, chilling him to the marrow. Bending low over his saddle, he hurriedly withdrew.

“If we lose our manhood today, how can we return to Liangshan Marsh?” thought Song Jiang. Aloud, he said: “Who will work off this rage for me?”

Zhu Tong looked at Lei Heng. “They've taken Liu Tang. So what!” he said. “If one man can't deal with Zhang Qin, we'll attack him together!”

Both men carrying halberds, they advanced murderously, Zhu Tong on the left, Lei Heng on the right. Zhang Qin laughed.

“One's not enough, so you've added another. Even if there were ten of you, it wouldn't matter!” Not a flicker of fear crossed his face. In each hand he concealed a stone.

Lei Heng reached him first. Zhang Qin's arm rose in god-like stance, and the stone flew so quickly it was impossible to dodge. Before Lei Heng knew what was happening the missile struck his cheek and knocked him flat on his back. As Zhu Tong rushed to the rescue, a stone hit him in the neck.

Guan Sheng, from the position, saw that both were wounded. Gathering all his might, he galloped out on his swift roan, brandishing his dragon sword. Zhang Qin, who had just driven off the other two, returned to the field. Again he threw. Guan Sheng hastily raised his weapon to ward off the stone, and it nicked the edge, striking sparks. His taste for battle vanished. Guan Sheng pulled his roan around and went back to base.

When General Two Spears Dong Ping saw this, he said to himself: “I surrendered to Song Jiang only recently. If I don't display some of my military skill, people won't think much of me when we go up the mountain.” He galloped onto the field, his set of spears in hand.

Zhang Qin rebuked him harshly. “Yours and mine are neighboring prefectures, as close as lips and teeth. Together we exterminated robbers, which was only fitting and proper. Why have you turned against the imperial court? You ought to be ashamed!”

Furious, Dong Ping charged. The horses met, the weapons rose. It was lance against spears, with four arms wildly darting. Sixty or seventy rounds they

fought, then Zhang Qin rode away.

“Others may fear your stones,” said Dong Ping, “but they can't touch me!”

Featherless Arrow set his lance in its socket, pulled a stone from his embroidered pouch, and threw. But Dong Ping's eyes were sharp and his hands fast. He flicked the missile aside. Zhang Qin extracted a second stone and threw again. Again, Dong Ping evaded it. Two stones had missed their mark. Zhang Qin was growing panicky. Dong Ping's steed pounded in hot pursuit of his own, almost nose to tail.

As Zhang Qin neared the left side of his army's arch of pennants, General Two Spears thrust at his hack. Twisting, Featherless Arrow ducked low over his stirrups, and the blade went harmlessly by.

The two steeds were now racing parallel. Zhang Qin set aside his lance. With both hands he grasped Dong Ping, his arms and spears, and tugged. But he couldn't budge him. The two men grappled on horseback.

Suo Chao, watching from Song Jiang's position, hurried to the rescue, brandishing his big ax. Gong Wang and Ding Desun galloped out from the opposite position and intercepted him. They fought savagely. Zhang Qin and Dong Ping were locked in inseparable combat, while the mounts of the other three milled furiously about.

Lin Chong, Hua Rong, Lu Fang and Guo Sheng advanced together, two with lances, two with crescent-bladed halberds, to assist Dong Ping and Suo Chao. Zhang Qin saw that the situation was worsening. He abandoned Dong Ping and rode quickly back to his own position. But Dong Ping would not give up. He rode after Featherless Arrow right into the midst of the enemy, forgetting all about the stones. Zhang Qin stealthily pulled one from his pouch and waited for Dong Ping's horse to draw nearer. Then, “Take that!” he cried.

General Two Spears hastily dodged, and the stone whizzed past his ear. He returned to his base. Suo Chao left Gong Wang and Ding Desun and hurried after him Zhang Qin didn't use his lance but softly extracted a stone and

flung it at Suo Chao. It struck him in the face before he could avoid it. Streaming blood, he returned to base with his ax.

Meanwhile, Lin Chong and Hua Rong had Gong Wang pinned down on one side, and Lu Fang and Guo Sheng had engaged Ding Desun on the other. Flurried, Gong Wang cast his javelin, but it hit neither of his opponents. He was weaponless now, and Lin Chong and Hua Rong captured him easily and took him back to their position.

Ding Desun twirled his trident and contended desperately with Lu Fang and Guo Sheng. He was unaware that Yan Qing was watching him from the arch of pennants.

“They've defeated fifteen of our chieftains in a row,” thought the Prodigy. “We'll lose face if we don't nab at least one lieutenant.”

He cast aside his staff, took up his bow, fitted an arrow, and let fly. It whistled into the hoof of Ding's mount, which stumbled to the ground. Lu and Guo immediately seized the fallen rider.

Zhang Qin wanted to go to his rescue, but the foe were too many. He returned to Dongchang with Liu Tang under guard. The prefect, from the town wall, had seen Featherless Arrow vanquish fifteen Mount Liangshan chieftains in succession. Although Featherless Arrow had lost Gong and Ding, he had captured Liu Tang. The prefect proceeded to his office and celebrated his victory with wine. Then he had Liu Tang put in jail with a rack around his neck, and sat down to confer with Zhang Qin.

As to Song Jiang, he returned with his army to camp. Gong and Ding he sent to the stronghold in Liangshan Marsh under escort. Afterwards, he consulted with Lu Junyi and Wu Yong.

“In the Five Dynasties period, Wang Yanzhang of the Great Liang beat thirty-six Tang commanders before the sun so much as moved their shadows,” he said. “Today, Zhang Qin vanquished fifteen of our chieftains. Truly, a splendid general, no less a man than Wang Yanzhang!”

The others had no reply, and Song Jiang continued.

“It seems to me he relies completely on Gong and Ding to cover his flanks. Now that we've captured them, we ought to be able to think of some good way to catch him as well.”

“You can rest assured, brother,” said Wu Yong. “I've been observing his movements, and I have it all worked out. Send the wounded chieftains back to the fortress, and direct Sagacious Lu, Wu Song, Sun Li, Huang Xin and LiLi to bring as many of our naval forces as they can muster. We want carts and boats so that we can advance both by land and water, coordinate navy and cavalry, and trick Zhang Qin. In this way we Will succeed.” And Wu Yong explained how the forces were to be deployed.

In the town, Zhang Qin was saying to the prefect: “Although we won, the robbers' strength is still intact. Send scouts to investigate, then we'll decide what to do.”

When the scouts returned, they reported: “Northwest of their camp there's vast amount of grain. We don't know where it came from, but it's loaded on over a hundred carts and five hundred boats, large and small, on the river. Both convoys are moving forward, under several supervisors along the way.”

“Can those scoundrels be up to something?” the prefect pondered. “We must be careful that they don't trick us. I'll send out more scouts to make sure it's really grain they're carrying.”

The next day a junior officer returned and said: “Those carts are laden with rice. Some of it spilled out. And although the cargoes on the boats are covered, we could see the ends of grain sacks.”

“I'm leaving tonight,” said Zhang Qin. “First, I'll stop the carts along the bank, then I'll seize the boats upon the river. If you'll lend a hand, Prefect, we'll capture them before the first beat of the watch drum!”

“An excellent plan. Just make sure you time it right.” The prefect directed that the soldiers, after eating and drinking their fill, put on armor and take plenty of empty sacks.

Holding his long lance, Zhang Qin quietly left the town at the head of a thousand men. Though the moon was faint, the sky was studded with stars. Before the expedition had gone ten *li* they saw a convoy of carts and a banner reading: *Righteous Loyalty Grain of the Marsh Fortress.* Walking in the lead was Sagacious Lu. He carried his Buddhist staff. His cloak was girt up around the waist.

“I'll bounce a stone off the skull of that bald-pate!” muttered Zhang Qin.

By then Lu had seen him, but he pretended to be unaware, and continued striding forward. But he forgot to take precautions against Zhang Qin's stones.

“Speed!” shouted Featherless Arrow, astride his steed.

The flying stone struck Lu's head, drawing blood and knocking him flat. Zhang Qin's cheering soldiers charged. Wu Song whipped out his two knives, rushed forward find rescued Sagacious, then fled, abandoning the carts.

Featherless Arrow seized them. They were indeed laden with grain. Too pleased to bother pursuing Sagacious Lu, he brought the carts into the town. The delighted prefect took them over. “Now for the grain boats,” said Zhang Qin.

“Be sure you time it right,” the prefect admonished.

Featherless Arrow mounted and rode to the South Gate. Grain boats without number could be seen on the river. He shouted for the gate to be opened. Yelling, his army charged down to the river's edge. Suddenly, heavy clouds gathered and a dark mist spread and covered the sky. Zhang Qin's soldiers, infantry and cavalry, couldn't see a thing. Gongsun Sheng had worked a magic spell.

Zhang Qin grew flurried, and his eyes dimmed. He wanted to go back, but there was no way open to either advance or retreat. Wild shouts rose on every side. He had no idea where the attackers came from. Lin Chong, leading his Iron Cavalry, drove Zhang Qin, horse and rider, into the water.

Waiting for him in a line in the river were eight naval chieftains: Li Jun, Zhang Heng, Zhang Shun, the three Ruan brothers and the two Tongs. Zhang Qin could not struggle loose. The three Ruan brothers grabbed and bound him, and took him into camp. The naval chieftains hurried to report his capture to Song Jiang.

At Wu Yong's urging, the outlaws attacked the town the same night. It was impossible for the prefect to withstand them by himself. On four sides outside the town cannon boomed. The gates swung wide. The terrified prefect had nowhere to run.

Song Jiang's forces surged into the town. First, they freed Liu Tang. Then they broke open the granaries, sent part of the grain and money to the mountain stronghold, and distributed the rest among the people. They spared the life of the prefect, since he ordinarily had been a decent official.

Song Jiang and chieftains gathered in the prefectural office. The naval commanders brought forward Zhang Qin. He had wounded many of their brothers, and the chieftains, grinding their teeth in rage, wanted to kill him. But Song Jiang ordered that he be untied, and came down the steps to greet him.

“We offended your mighty prestige by mistake,” he apologized. “Please don't hold it against us.” He invited Featherless Arrow into the hall.

Before the words were out of his mouth, Sagacious Lu, his head bound with a kerchief, rushed up with raised staff to smite Zhang Qin. Song Jiang blocked him and shouted at him to stand aside.

Moved by Song Jiang's chivalry, Featherless Arrow kowtowed and declared his surrender. Song Jiang poured wine upon the ground and broke an arrow.

“If you brothers insist on vengeance, Heaven will not protect you, and you'll die beneath the sword!” he prophesied.

The chieftains had no reply. They smilingly relaxed and acceded. Everyone was pleased. The troops were mustered in preparation for the return to the mountain. Zhang Qin had a suggestion.

“In Dongchang district there is a veterinary named Huangfu Duan,” he said. “He's a good judge of horses, and knows the causes of their chills and fevers. With potions and needles, he cures them all. His skill is truly remarkable. He's from Youzhou Prefecture, originally. He has blue eyes and blond hair and foreign features, and is known as the Purple Beard. We could use him on Mount Liangshan. We could tell him to bring his family and come with us, if that meets with your approval.”

Song Jiang agreed with pleasure. “If Huangfu Duan is willing to join us, we'll be glad to have him.”

Happy that Song Jiang manifested such a clear fondness for him, Zhang Qin summoned the veterinary. Song Jiang and the chieftains were favorably impressed. Huangfu Duan was certainly out of the ordinary. His blue eyes had two pupils each, and his curly beard extended down below his waist. Huangfu was received with such chivalry that he willingly agreed to join the band. Song Jiang was more than content.

Having restored internal harmony, he ordered the chieftains to muster the carts, laden with grain and gold and silver, and set out for the mountain fortress. The two armies, front and rear, also marched.

The return journey was uneventful, and they soon reached Loyalty Hall. Song Jiang summoned Gong Wang and Ding Desun and spoke to them kindly. The two kowtowed and declared their allegiance. Huangfu Duan became the stronghold's official veterinary. General Two Spears Dong Ping and Featherless Arrow Zhang Qin were enrolled as chieftains.

Extremely pleased, Song Jiang called for a feast of celebration. Each took his place in Loyalty Hall according to rank. There were exactly one hundred and eight of them.

“Brothers,” said Song Jiang, “from the time we began to gather on this mountain, we have never had any real losses anywhere. This is due to Heaven's beneficence, not to the ability of any man. I am leader today only thanks to the courage of you brothers. Joined here in righteous assembly, I have a few words I would like to say. I hope you brothers will listen.”

“Please speak, Big Brother,” said Wu Yong. “We'd like to hear you.”

Song Jiang expounded his ideas before the chieftains. And as a result the thirty-six stars of Heavenly Spirits confirmed their destined number and the seventy-two stars of Earthly Fiends tallied with the divine design.

What, then, did Song Jiang propose? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 71
In Loyalty Hall a Stone Tablet Bears a Heavenly Script
The Heroes of Liangshan Marsh Take Seats in Order of Rank

“After my trouble in Jiangzhou I came up the mountain,” said Song Jiang, “and later, thanks entirely to the support of you heroic brothers, I was made leader. Gathered here today we have a total of one hundred and eight chieftains. I am very happy. Since brother Chao Gai's death, on each of the occasions we led troops down the mountain we always returned intact. This is because Heaven defended us. It was not due to the talent of any man. Whenever one of us was captured by the enemy, whether imprisoned or wounded, he always came back safely. All of this was the work of Heaven. None of us can claim any credit. And here we are today, one hundred and eight of us gathered in righteous meeting. Truly an event rarely witnessed from ancient times to the present!

“These are days when armed soldiers roam, slaughtering at will and committing unpardonable crimes. I'm thinking of holding a great mass to thank the spirits of Heaven and Earth for their protective benevolence. We should pray first that they continue to preserve our health and security. Second, that the emperor will pardon our terrible crimes and allow us to serve our country loyally to the death. Third, that Chao Gai's ghost may soon become a spirit in Heaven so that in later reincarnations we may meet again.

“We should pray also that those who died by violence—the burned, the drowned, the murdered innocents—be allowed to cross over into Heaven.

“This is what I'd like to do. I wonder what you brothers think of the idea?”

“Excellent,” said the chieftains. “A fine thing that can bring only good.”

“Let Taoist mentor Gongsun Sheng conduct the mass,” suggested Wu Yong. “Send men down to invite Taoist priests of high attainment to attend and bring the necessary paraphernalia. Have someone buy scented candles and paper horses, plus fruit and flowers, vegetables and other meatless dishes, and all things required for the sacrifices.”

It was decided to hold the mass for seven days, starting the fifteenth of the fourth lunar month. The stronghold spent money freely and made full preparations. As the time drew near, four banners were hung in front of Loyalty Hall. Inside, three high altars were built, and idols of the Seven Precious and Three Clean Saints were set. On either side stood the Spirits of the Twenty-Eight Constellations and the Twelve Watches—for these were the true officiators over all important masses. Outside the hall were placed idols of the guardian generals Cui, Lu, Deng and Dou. Then the paraphernalia was laid out and the Taoist priests invited to begin. Including Gongsun Sheng, they numbered forty-nine.

It was a clear, bright day, pleasant and mild, with the moon white in the summer sky and the breeze gentle. Song Jiang and Lu Junyi lit the incense first, followed by Wu Yong and the other chieftains. Gongsun Sheng, officiating over the sacrifices, handed out the required texts and orders. He and the forty-eight Taoist priests would conduct mass thrice daily for seven days. Then they would disperse.

Song Jiang begged Heaven for a sign. He asked Gongsun Sheng to burn special prayers written on paper three times daily, so that their smoke would waft them to the Emperor of Heaven. And so, the third watch of the seventh day found Gongsun Sheng on the first tier of the altar, the other priests on the second, and Song Jiang and the chieftains on the third. The lesser commanders and officers stood below. All were earnestly entreating Heaven for a sign.

Suddenly, there was a sound like the ripping of fabric in the northwest corner of the sky. Everyone looked. They saw an object resembling an

upended golden platter, narrow at both ends and broad in the middle. Known as Heaven's Gate, or Heaven's Eye, it was dazzlingly bright and resplendent as sunset clouds. A column of fire, shaped like a willow basket, twirled down from the center of the Eye towards the altar. It circled the altar once, then plunged into the earth near the southern end of the hall.

Heaven's Eye was closed by then, and the Taoist priests descended from their altar. Song Jiang ordered men to dig with shovels and mattocks where the fire had vanished. At a depth of three feet, they found a stone tablet. It was inscribed on both sides with mystic writing. Song Jiang ordered that the ashes of the paper prayers be scattered.

At dawn the next day, after the priests had their breakfast, he gave them gifts of gold and cloth. Only then did they examine the stone tablet. It was covered with weird squiggles, like tadpoles, which no one could decipher. But one of the priests, named Ho, was skilled in the occult.

“I have a set of books at home, handed down from my ancestors,” he said, “which teaches how to read Heavenly writing. Since ancient times, it's always been this tadpole script, and I've learned how to decipher it. Let me have a look and I'll tell you what it says.”

Pleased, Song Jiang handed over the tablet. The priest perused it for some time. Finally, he spoke.

“These are names of all of you gallant warriors. On one side it says: 'Act in Heaven's Behalf.' On the other: 'Complete Loyalty and Righteousness.' At the top are diagrams of the Great and Small Dippers. Below that are your names. If there's nothing unfavorable, I'll read them aloud, one by one.”

“How fortunate that you can solve the mystery. We're extremely thankful. If you can enlighten us, we'll owe you our deepest gratitude. Please don't hesitate even if it contains criticism. Hold nothing back. We want to hear every word.”

Song Jiang told Xiao Rang the Master Hand to take notes on yellow paper.

Ho the Taoist priest said: “The thirty-six lines on the front are names of stars of Heavenly Spirits. The seventy-two lines on the back are names of stars of Earthly Fiends.” He gazed at them for several minutes, then told Xiao Rang to copy as he dictated.

On the front of the stone tablet were the names of the 36 stars of Heavenly Spirits. They are:

Song Jiang, Tiankui Star, *the Timely Rain*

Lu Junyi, Tiangang Star, *the Jade Unicorn*

Wu Yong, Tianji Star, *the Wizard*

Gongsun Sheng, Tianxian Star, *the Dragon in Clouds*

Guan Sheng, Tianyong Star, *the Big Halberd*

Lin Chong, Tianxiong Star, *the Panther Head*

Qin Ming, Tianmeng Star, *the Thunderbolt*

Huyan Zhuo, Tianwei Star, *the Two Rods*

Hua Rong, Tianying Star, *the Lesser Li Guang*

Chai Jin, Tiangui Star, *the Small Whirlwind*

Li Ying, Tianfu Star, *the Heaven-Soaring Eagle*

Zhu Tong, Tianman Star, *the Beautiful Beard*

Sagacious Lu, Tiangu Star, *the Tattooed Monk*

Wu Song, Tianshang Star, *the Pilgrim*

Dong Ping, Tianli Star, *General Two Spears*

Zhang Qin, Tianjie Star, *the Featherless Arrow*

Yang Zhi, Tian'an Star, *the Blue-Faced Beast*

Xu Ning, Tianyou Star, *the Metal Lancer*

Suo Chao, Tiankong Star, *the Urgent Vanguard*

Dai Zong, Tiansu Star, *the Marvelous Traveler*

Liu Tang, Tianyi Star, *the Red-Haired Demon*

Li Kui, Tiansha Star, *the Black Whirlwind*

Shi Jin, Tianwei Star, *the Nine Dragons*

Mu Hong, Tianjiu Star, *the Unrestrained*

Lei Heng, Tiantui Star, *the Winged Tiger*

Li Jun, Tianshou Star, *the Turbulent River Dragon*

Ruan the Second, Tianjian Star, *the Ferocious Giant*

Zhang Heng, Tianjing Star, *the Boat Flame*

Ruan the Fifth, Tianzui Star, *the Recklessly Rash*

Zhang Shun, Tiansun Star, *the White Streak in the Waves*

Ruan the Seventh, Tianbai Star, *the Devil Incarnate*

Yang Xiong, Tianlao Star, *the Pallid*

Shi Xiu, Tianhui Star, *the Rash*

Xie Zhen, Tianbao Star, *the Two-Headed Snake*

Xie Bao, Tianku Star, *the Twin-Tailed Scorpion*

Yan Qing, Tianqiao Star, *the Prodigy*

On the back of the stone tablet were written the names of 72 stars of Earthly Fiends:

Zhu Wu, Dikui Star, *the Miraculous Strategist*

Huang Xin, Disha Star, *the Suppressor of Three Mountains*

Sun Li, Diyong Star, *the Sickly General*

Xuan Zan, Dijie Star, *the Ugly Son-in-Law*

Hao Siwen, Dixiong Star, *the Wild Dog*

Han Tao, Diwei Star, *the Ever-Victorious General*

Peng Qi, Diying Star, *the Eyes of Heaven General*

Shan Tinggui, Diqi Star, *the Water General*

Wei Dingguo, Dimeng Star, *the Fire General*

Xiao Rang, Diwen Star, *the Master Hand*

Pei Xuan, Dizheng Star, *the Ironclad Virtue*

Ou Peng, Dikuo Star, *the Golden Wings Brushing the Clouds*

Deng Fei, Dihe Star, *the Fiery-Eyed Lion*

Yan Shun, Diqiang Star, *the Elegant Tiger*

Yang Lin, Di'an Star, *the Elegant Panther*

Ling Zhen, Dizhou Star, *the Heaven-Shaking Thunder*

Jiang Jing, Dihui Star, *the Magic Calculator*

Lu Fang, Dizuo Star, *the Little Duke*

Guo Sheng, Diyou Star, *the Second Rengui*

An Daoquan, Diling Star, *the Skilled Doctor*

Huangpu Duan, Dishou Star, *the Purple Beard*

Wang Ying, Diwei Star, *the Stumpy Tiger*

Hu Sanniang, Dihui Star, *Ten Feet of Steel*

Bao Xu, Dibao Star, *the God of Death*

Fan Rui, Diran Star, *the Demon King Who Roils the World*

Kong Ming, Dichang Star, *the Comet*

Kong Liang, Dikuang Star, *the Flaming Star*

Xiang Chong, Difei Star, *the Eight-Armed Nezha*

Li Gun, Dizou Star, *the Flying Divinity*

Jin Dajian, Diqiao Star, *the Jade-Armed Craftsman*

Ma Lin, Diming Star, *the Elfin Flutist*

Tong Wei, Dijin Star, *the Dragon from the Cave*

Tong Meng, Ditui Star, *the River Churning Clam*

Meng Kang, Diman Star, *the Jade Flagpole*

Hou Jian, Disui Star, *the Long-Armed Ape*

Chen Da, Dizhou Star, *the Gorge-Leaping Tiger*

Yang Chun, Diyin Star, *the White-Spotted Snake*

Zheng Tianshou, Diyi Star, *the Fair-Faced Gentleman*

Tao Zongwang, Dili Star, *the Nine Tailed Tortoise*

Song Qing, Dijun Star, *the Iron Fan*

Yue He, Dile Star, *the Iron Throat*

Gong Wang, Dijie Star, *the Flowery-Necked Tiger*

Ding Desun, Disu Star, *the Arrow-Struck Tiger*

Mu Chun, Dizhen Star, *the Slightly Restrained*

Cao Zheng, Diji Star, *the Demon Carver*

Song Wan, Dimo Star, *the Guardian of the Clouds*

Du Qian, Diyao Star, *the Skyscraper*

Xue Yong, Diyou Star, *the Sick Tiger*

Shi En, Difu Star, *the Golden-Eyed Tiger Cub*

Li Zhong, Dipi Star, *the Tiger-Fighting General*

Zhou Tong, Dikong Star, *the Little King*

Tang Long, Digu Star, *the Gold-Coin Spotted Leopard*

Du Xing, Diquan Star, *the Demon Face*

Zou Yuan, Diduan Star, *the Dragon from the Forest*

Zou Run, Dijiao Star, *the One-Horned Dragon*

Zhu Gui, Diqiu Star, *the Dry-Land Crocodile*

Zhu Fu, Dizang Star, *the Smiling Tiger*

Cai Fu, Diping Star, *the Iron Arm*

Cai Qing, Disun Star, *the Single Blossom*

LiLi, Dinu Star, *the Hell's Summoner*

Li Yun, Dicha Star, *the Black-Eyed Tiger*

Jiao Ting, Di'e Star, *the Merciless*

Shi Yong, Dichou Star, *the Stone General*

Sun Xin, Dishu Star, *the Junior General*

Mistress Gu, Diyin Star, *the Tigress*

Zhang Qing, Dixing Star, *the Vegetable Gardener*

Sun Erniang, Dizhuang Star, *the Witch*

Wang Dingliu, Dilie Star, *the Lightning*

Yu Baosi, Dijian Star, *the Spirit of the Dangerous Road*

Bai Sheng, Dihao Star, *the Daylight Rat*

Shi Qian, Dizei Star, *the Flea on the Drum*

Duan Jingzhu, Digou Star, *the Golden Dog*

When he had finished, the chieftains stared at the list in amazement. “Who would have thought,” Song Jiang mused, “that a petty functionary like me would be the highest of all the stars. And you, brothers, originally were with me up in the sky together. Today, Heaven has indicated that it is right for us to be united in chivalry. We've reached our full number, and our ranks

have been decided by Heaven, with a general division into higher and lower. We've been listed in order, under the star categories of Heavenly Spirits and Earthly Fiends. Each of you chieftains must keep to his particular rank. Let there be no squabbling. Heaven's edict must be obeyed."

"Who would dare go against Heaven's will!" said the chieftains.

Song Jiang rewarded priest He with fifty ounces of gold. He also gave some payment to the other priests. They collected their paraphernalia for the mass and departed down the mountain.

Song Jiang then conferred with Wu Yong and Zhu Wu. They decided to hang a tablet reading "Loyalty Hall" on the building of that name, put another sign on Unity Pavilion, and build stockades around all three passes in front of the stronghold. Behind the hall they would level a "V" shaped terrace up the slope, and construct a large pavilion at the apex, with building wings extending down on the east and the west. In the pavilion they would place the spirit tablet of Chao Gai. Song Jiang, Wu Yong, Lu Fang and Guo Sheng would occupy the east wing. Lu Junyi, Gongsun Sheng, Kong Ming and Kong Liang would occupy the west.

New pennants and banners were made. On the very top of the mountain an apricot-yellow banner was stretched reading: "Act in Heaven's Behalf." In front of Loyalty Hall were two banners. One said: "Defender of Justice from Shandong," the other: "Jade Unicorn from Hebei," meaning Song Jiang and Lu Junyi, respectively. In addition there were banners of dragons, tigers, bears and panthers rampant; pennants of blue dragons with white tigers, vermilion birds on black backgrounds; golden axes with white tassels, blue banners and black umbrellas, and large fringed banners of black. These were for the use of the armies.

There were also banners of the Four Stars in the Big Dipper, Central Heaven and the Four Directions, the Three Essentials and the Nine Elements, the Twenty-Eight Constellations, the Sixty-Four Diagrams, the Nine Heavens and the Eight Diagrams—in all a hundred and twenty-four Heaven-governing banners, all made by Hou Jian. Metal tallies and seals were forged by Jin Dajian.

When everything was ready, an auspicious day was chosen, and oxen and horses were slaughtered in sacrifice to the Spirits of Heaven and Earth. The signs “Loyalty Hall” and “Unity Pavilion” were hung, and the apricot-yellow banner “Act in Heaven's Behalf was also put in place. To the pillars on either side of the entrance to the hall two Vermilion vertical tablets were attached. Reading downward, and continuing from the right tablet to the left, they said: “Be ardently righteous and loyal always, never covet wealth or harm the people.”

That day Song Jiang ordered a huge feast. He took up his tallies and seals of office and addressed the gathering. “Brothers,” he said, “let each of you carry out your duties of leadership, and hearken without fail to orders. To do otherwise would harm our chivalry. Whoever willfully disobeys shall be punished according to military law. None will be let off lightly.”

He then read the chain of command, which was as follows:

General Commanders:

Song Jiang the Defender of Chivalry and Lu Junyi the Jade Unicorn

Chiefs of Staff:

Wu Yong the Wizard Wu Yong and Gongsun Sheng the Dragon in Clouds

Officers for Money and Grain Control:

Chai Jin the Small Whirlwind and Li Ying the Heaven-Soaring Eagle

Officers in Charge of Main Cavalry:

Guan Sheng the Bid Halberd; Lin Chong the Panther Head; Qin Ming the Thunderbolt; Huyan Zhuo the Two Rods and Dong Ping the General Two Spears

Officers in Charge of Light Cavalry and Vanguard:

Hua Rong the Lesser Li Guang; Xu Ning the Metal Lancer; Yang Zhi the Blue-Faced Beast; Suo Chao the Urgent Vanguard; Zhang Qin the Featherless Arrow; Zhu Tong the Beautiful Beard; Shi Jin the Nine Dragons and Mu Hong the Unrestrained

Officers in Charge of Distant Scouting and Picket Cavalry:

Huang Xin the Suppressor of Three Mountains; Sun Li the Sickly General; Xuan Zan the Ugly Son in Law; Hao Siwen the Wild Dog; Han Tao the Ever-Victorious General; Peng Qi the Eyes of Heaven General; Shan Tinggui the Water General; Wei Dingguo the Fire General; Ou Peng the Golden Wings Brushing the Clouds; Deng Fei the Fiery-Eyed Lion; Yan Shun the Elegant Tiger; Ma Lin the Elfin Flutist; Chen Da the Gorge-Leaping Tiger; Yang Chun the White-Spotted Snake; Yang Lin the Elegant Panther and Zhou Tong the Little King

Senior Infantry Officers:

Sagacious Lu the Tattooed Monk; Wu Song the Pilgrim, Liu Tang the Red-Haired Demon; Lei Heng the Winged Tiger; Li Kui the Black Whirlwind; Yan Qing the Prodigy; Yang Xiong the Pallid; Shi Xiu the Rash; Xie Zhen the Two-Headed Snake and Xie Bao the Two-Tailed Scorpion

Junior Infantry Officers:

Fan Rui the Demon King Who Roils the World; Bao Xu the God of Death; Xiang Chong the Eight-Armed Nezha; Li Gun the Flying Divinity; Xue Yong the Sick Tiger; Shi En the Golden-Eyed Tiger Cub; Mu Chun the Slightly Restrained; Li Zhong the Tiger-Fighting General; Zheng Tianshou the Fair-Eyed Gentleman; Song Wan the Guardian of the Clouds; Du Qian the Skyscraper; Zou Yuan the Dragon from the Forest; Zou Run the One-Horned Dragon; Gong Wang the Flowery-Necked Tiger; Ding Desun the Arrow-Struck Tiger; Jiao Ting the Merciless and Shi Yong the Stone General

Officers in Charge of Four Water Defense Forts:

Li Jun the Turbulent River Dragon; Zhang Heng the Boat Flame; Zhang Shun the White Streak in the Waves; Ruan the Second the Ferocious Giant; Ran the Fifth the Reckless Rash; Ruan the Seventh the Devil Incarnate; Tong Wei the Dragon from the Cave and Tong Meng the River Churning Clam

Officers in Charge of Four Information-Gathering and New Arrival-Welcoming Inns:

Dongshan Inn: Sun Xin the Junior General and Mistress Gu the Tigress

Xishan Inn: Zhang Qing the Vegetable Gardener and Sun Erniang the Witch

Nanshan Inn: Zhu Gui the Dry-Land Crocodile and Du Xing the Demon Face

Beishan Inn: LiLi the Hell's Summoner and Wang Dingliu the Lightning

Chief Scout:

Dai Zong the Marvelous Traveler

Officers in Charge of Delivery of Secret Messages for Infantry:

Yue He the Iron Throat; Shi Qian the Flea on the Drum; Duan Jingzhu the Golden God and Bai Sheng the Daylight Rat Cavalry

Officers Guarding Central Army Headquarters:

Lu Fang the Little Duke and Guo Zheng the Second Rengui

Infantry Officers Guarding Central Army Headquarters:

Kong Ming the Comet and Kong Liang the Flaming Star

Officers in Charge of Punishments and Executions:

Cai Fu the Iron Arm and Cai Qing the Single Blossom

Cavalry Liaisons Among the Three Armies:

Wang Ying the Stumpy Tiger and Hu Sanniang the Ten Feet of Iron

Deputy Chief of Staff:

Zhu Wu the Miraculous Strategist

The following are officers who were assigned administrative jobs:

Dispatches and Orders: Xiao Rang the Master Hand

Military and Civil Awards and Punishments: Pei Xuan the Ironclad Virtue

Money and Grain Accounting: Jiang Jing the Magic Calculator

Boat Building: Meng Kang the Jade Flagpole

Tally and Seal Making: Jin Dajian the Jade-Armed Craftsman

Manufacture of Banners and Robes: Hou Jian the Long-Armed Ape

Veterinary and Horse Attending: Huangpu Duan the Purple Beard Huangpu

Doctor of Medicine and Surgery: An Daoshun the Skilled Doctor

Weapons and Armor Making: Tang Long the Gold-Coin Spotted Leopard

Manufacture of Cannon: Ling Zhen the Heaven-Shaken Thunder

House Construction and Maintenance: Li Yun the Black-Eyed Tiger

Butchery: Cao Zheng the Demon Carver

Banquet Supervision: Song Qing the Iron Fan Wine and Vinegar Brewing: Zhu Fu the Smiling Tiger Erection of Walls and Fortifications: Tao Zongwang the Nine-Tailed Tortoise

Chief Standard Bearer: Yu Baosi the Spirit of the Dangerous Road

And one each to the following sixteen supervisory positions: dispatches and orders, military and civil awards and punishments, money and grain accounting, boat building, tally and seal making, manufacture of banners and robes, veterinary, doctor of medicine and surgery, weapons and armor making, manufacture of cannon, house construction, butcher, banquet supervisor, brewer, erector of walls and fortifications, and chief standard bearer.

The decree was dated “a lucky day of the fourth lunar month, in the second year of the Xuan He Period, at the great meeting on Mount Liangshan, when assignment of duties was proclaimed.”

Each chieftain then received his appropriate tallies and seals and the feasting ended. Everyone was very drunk. The chieftains left to take up their posts. Those who had not yet been appointed retired to quarters before and behind the “V” terrace to await orders.

Song Jiang selected another auspicious day, burned incense, and ordered drums beaten to summon the chieftains. When all had assembled in the hall, he addressed them.

“This is no ordinary occasion. I have something to say. Since we have come together as the stars of Heavenly Spirits and Earthly Fiends, we must vow before Heaven to unite to the death without reservation, rescue one another from danger and aid one another in misfortune, while striving jointly to defend the country and preserve peace for the people.”

The chieftains heartily concurred. They too lit incense and knelt together in the hall, Song Jiang continued.

“I was only a petty functionary, and have neither learning nor ability. But thanks to the protection of Heaven and Earth and the illumination of the sun and the moon, we brothers have gathered here on Mount Liangshan in the Marsh and formed a heroic host. There are now one hundred and eight of us, which conforms to the number ordained by Heaven and is pleasing to the hearts of men. From this day on, if any of us acts in a deliberately unvirtuous manner, or offends our code of chivalry, we pray that Heaven and Earth scourge him, that the spirits and men destroy him, that he never again be reincarnated in human form and remain forever sunk in the depths. We vow to serve our country in righteous loyalty, act in Heaven's behalf, defend our borders and secure our people. Heaven examine us, and by Your Luminance reply.”

In chorus the chieftains swore their eternal unity. That day, they reaffirmed their fraternity in a blood oath. They imbibed heavily of wine before the convention finally disbanded.

This, reader, was the grand confluence of chivalry in Liangshan Marsh. The origin of these men and their assignments was preordained. We shall not repeat ourselves.

The gallant fellows often went down the mountain, alone or at the head of a body of men, or simply a few of the chieftains together, and patrolled the roads. Ordinary travellers and merchants were not molested. But if they encountered a high official, they lightened his coffers of their gold and

silver. Not a member of his family was left alive. Loot was delivered to the mountain stronghold and put in the treasury for collective use. Trifling items of booty were divided among the men.

Ranging within a radius of three hundred *li*, the outlaws openly plundered the wealth of prominent families which oppressed the people. Who dared to oppose! They raided the accumulations of such persons and newly rich upstarts, near and far, and carried them up the mountain. They staged well over a thousand such raids. No one could resist them, and they Cared nothing about possible public lamentations by their victims. In any event, no one spoke out and they were never exposed.

Song Jiang remained on the mountain after the oath of unity. The scorching heat of summer was replaced by the cool of early autumn. The Ninth Day of the Ninth Lunar Month Festival was fast approaching. Song Jiang directed Song Qing to lay a feast at which the brothers could enjoy the flowering chrysanthemums. All those who were away from the fortress were summoned back.

There was a mountain of meat and a sea of wine that day. Quantities were first dispensed among the outlying forces of the cavalry, infantry and navy, and among the junior commanders, so that they might form their own gatherings and dine together.

Chrysanthemums were banked in Loyalty Hall, where the chieftains sat according to rank, wine cups in hand. In the front of the hall, on either side, gongs crashed and drums pounded. The chieftains revelled, to the clink of cups and chopsticks, with much noise and laughter. Ma Lin played the flute and sang, Yan Qing strummed the *zheng* lute.

Before they knew it, it was dusk. Song Jiang, very drunk, called for paper and a brush-pen, determined to write a poem. When he had finished, he sang it to musical accompaniment. It went like this:

Welcoming the Double Ninth

With newly distilled good wine,

We gaze at the blue waters, red bills,

Yellow reeds and dark bamboo.

The grey in my hair is ever increasing,

But a yellow chrysanthemum is tucked over one ear.

Let us savor out friendship,

More precious than gold or jade.

We've controlled the savage foe and can defend our borders,

Our orders are wise, our discipline tight.

We want only to repel the barbarian invaders,

Defend the people and our country.

Constantly we burn with loyal ardor, though wicked officials

Are blind to our exploits.

May the emperor soon hand down an amnesty,

Then will our hearts be fully at ease.

“Day in and day out you talk about amnesty,” Wu Song shouted. “You're cooling our enthusiasm!”

And the Black Whirlwind glared and exclaimed: “Amnesty, amnesty, who needs a friggin amnesty!” He kicked over the table, smashing everything on it.

“How dare that swarthy oaf behave so rudely,” Song Jiang cried. “Guards, take him out and cut his head off!”

The chieftains dropped to their knees. “He's drunk. Forgive him, brother,” they pleaded.

“Rise, brothers. Put him in jail, then.”

The chieftains were relieved. A few jailors approached Li Kui.

“Are you afraid I'll resist?” the Black Whirlwind demanded. “I wouldn't complain if Big Brother had me sliced to ribbons! He could have me killed and I wouldn't care! Though Heaven itself can't scare me I'll listen to him.”

He walked off with the guards to the jail. The incident shook Song Jiang into sobriety. He was very depressed. Wu Yong spoke to him soothingly.

“Everyone is enjoying this feast you ordered. Li Kui's a crude fellow and goes a little wild when he's drunk. Why take it to heart? Join our brothers in their revelry.”

Song Jiang said: “When I got drunk in Jiangzhou and wrote that rebellious poem, he fought for me. Today I wrote another and nearly had him killed. Luckily, you brothers spoke up. My emotional ties with Li Kui are the strongest. We're as close as flesh and bone. I can't help having tears in my eyes.”

He turned to Wu Song. “Brother, you're an intelligent man. I advocate amnesty so that we can return to a respectable life and become government officials serving our country. Why should that cool your enthusiasm?”

“All the ministers today, whether civil or military, are crooks,” said Sagacious Lu, “and they've got the emperor fooled. Those rogues are as black as my cassock. Who can wash the imperial court clean? An amnesty won't solve anything. Let's have a ceremonial parting, and tomorrow each can go his separate way and be done with it.”

“Listen to me, brothers,” said Song Jiang. “The emperor is sacred and pure. Because he's surrounded by corrupt ministers he's temporarily confused. But the day will come when the clouds will part and the sun will emerge again. He'll know that we act on Heaven's behalf and never harm the people, and he'll pardon our crimes. We'll serve the country with one heart and strive to distinguish ourselves. What could be finer? That's why I hope we'll be amnestied soon. I want nothing else.”

The chieftains thanked Song Jiang profusely. They drank heartily and with good cheer. The banquet broke up and they returned to their respective posts.

Early the next morning chieftains went to see Li Kui. He was still asleep. They awakened him.

“You were drunk yesterday,” they said, “and you swore at Big Brother. Today, you're going to be executed.”

“I wouldn't dare swear at him even in my dreams,” said the Black Whirlwind. “But if he wants to kill me, let him.”

They led him into the hall and asked Song Jiang what punishment he should be given. Song Jiang berated Li Kui sternly.

“I have many men under my command. We'd have no law and order whatever if they all behaved as rudely as you! For the sake of these brothers, I'll suspend sentence on your execution. But it will go hard with you if you misbehave again!”

Li Kui, murmuring submissively, withdrew. The chieftains also departed.

The days were uneventful as the winter solstice drew near. Snow fell, mantling the world with silver. The sky cleared and a man came up from below and reported: “Seven or eight *li* from here we captured a group from Laizhou transporting lanterns for the Eastern Capital. What shall we do with them?”

“Don't bind them,” said Song Jiang. “Bring them up here.” Not long after, the travellers were led into the hall. Two were government bailiffs, eight or nine were lantern artisans. Their wares were on five carts. The leader of them spoke.

“I'm a bailiff in Laizhou. These fellows are lantern artisans. Every year the capital orders three sets of lanterns from our prefecture. This year they've asked for two more in addition. The lanterns are the Jade Shed Intricate Nine-Hued type.”

Song Jiang treated the travellers to wine and food, then asked them to display the lanterns. The artisans hung the Jade Shed lanterns, a total of eighty-one, on four sides. Suspended in Loyalty Hall, they extended from the rafters to the floor.

“I'd keep all your lanterns,” said Song Jiang, “if I weren't afraid it might get you into difficulty. Just leave me one Nine-Hued lantern set, and you can deliver the rest to the officials. And here are twenty ounces of silver for your trouble.”

The travellers thanked him and departed. Song Jiang had the lanterns lit and placed in Chao Gai's memorial hall. The next day he spoke to the chieftains.

“I was born in Shandong and I've never been to the capital. I hear that the emperor is having a big lantern show, with public merry-making and a celebration of the first full moon of the new year. Manufacture of the lanterns began in the winter solstice and has finished only now. I'd like to go into the city secretly with a few brothers and take a look at the lanterns.”

“That's not feasible,” said Wu Yong. “The Eastern Capital has more police than anywhere. If anything went wrong, what could we do?”

“I'll stay out of sight in an inn during the day. I'll only go into the city at night. What could happen?”

The chieftains tried to dissuade him in vain. Song Jiang insisted.

And because Song Jiang went to see the lanterns, a theater was reduced to rubble and a street of brothels became a battlefield. Truly, bold tigers approached the Imperial Palace, fierce stars encroached on Reclining Ox Fort in the night.

How did Song Jiang cause a disturbance in the Eastern Capital? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 72
Chai Jin Wears a Cockade and Enters the Forbidden Courtyard
Li Kui on Festival Night Disturbs the Eastern Capital

In Loyalty Hall that day Song Jiang announced the disposition of those who would go to see the lanterns: “I will travel with Chai Jin, Shi Jin with Mu Hong, Sagacious Lu with Wu Song, and Zhu Tong with Liu Tang. The rest of you will remain and guard the fortress.”

“They say the lanterns of the Eastern Capital are a pretty sight,” said Li Kui. “I want to go too.”

“Impossible,” said Song Jiang.

Li Kui insisted stubbornly. There was no refusing him. Finally, Song Jiang relented.

“All right. But only on condition that you don't make any trouble. Dress as a servant.”

He told Yan Qing to accompany them also, with the specific task of keeping a watchful eye on Li Kui.

You will remember, reader, that Song Jiang's face bore the tattoo of the criminal. How could he appear in the capital city? After the skilled doctor An Daoquan had arrived at the stronghold he had removed the mark with a powerful caustic. Later, he treated the wound with good medicines. When a red scar formed he removed this gradually with daily applications of

poultices containing powdered gold and ground jade. That is what medical books refer to when they talk of “obliterating blemishes with fine jade.”

Song Jiang instructed Shi Jin and Mu Hong to go first, disguised as travellers. Sagacious Lu and Wu Song would go next, as wandering monks. Lastly would be Zhu Tong and Liu Tang, in the garb of merchants. All wore swords and carried halberds and, needless to say, had concealed weapons on their persons. Song Jiang himself and Chai Jin pretended to be vacationing officials. Dai Zong went as a lieutenant. In the event of any emergency, he could rush back to the stronghold with a report.

Li Kui and Yan Qing, the “servants,” transported the luggage of the “officials” down the mountain on carrying-poles. The chieftains saw the travellers off to the Shore of Golden Sands. Wu Yong cautioned Li Kui. “Whenever you set out on your own you get into a jam. This time you're going to the Eastern Capital with Big Brother to see the lanterns. It's not your usual jaunt. You're not to drink on the road. Behave with caution and curb your temper. If you provoke any clashes, we brothers may have to terminate our relationship.”

“Don't worry, Military Advisor,” said the Black Whirlwind, “I won't stir up anything.”

They parted, and the travellers set out. They touched Jizhou, passed Tengzhou, went through Danzhou, reached Caozhou, and at last arrived at an inn outside the Wanshou Gate of the Eastern Capital, where they took quarters. It was the eleventh day of the first lunar month. Song Jiang conferred with Chai Jin.

“I don't dare enter the capital tomorrow in daylight,” he said. “I'll wait until the evening of the fourteenth, when the celebration is noisiest, and go in then.”

“I'll scout out a route for you with Yan Qing tomorrow.”

“Excellent.”

The following day Chai Jin dressed handsomely, bound his head in a fresh kerchief, and put on clean shoes and stockings. Yan Qing also garbed himself fashionably. The two left the inn. The suburban households were festive and gay as they prepared to enjoy the lantern festival and celebrate the peaceful atmosphere. Chai and Yan reached the gate without incident and entered the city.

They strolled along Imperial Road, taking in the sights, and came to the area adjoining the palace's East Glory Gate. Here were many taverns and tea-houses, patronized by people richly garbed in silks and satins, each in a distinctive color. Chai Jin led Yan Qing to a small tavern. They went upstairs and sat down in a room overlooking the street.

They could see attendants going in and out of the palace grounds. Each wore a cockade in the shape of a flower with jade-green leaves tacked to the side of his head kerchief. Chai whispered some instructions in Yan's ear. Yan nodded, went swiftly down the stairs and left the tavern. Fortunately, the attendant he approached was rather simple-minded. Yan hailed him respectfully.

“I don't know your face,” the man said. “We've never met.”

“My master is an old friend of yours. He's sent me to invite you to join him. Aren't you Inspector Zhang?”

“My name is Wang.”

“Oh, Inspector Wang, of course. That's the name. I was in such a hurry, I forgot.”

Wang went with Yan into the tavern and up the stairs. Yan raised the door curtain and announced: “Inspector Wang is here.” He gave Chai a hidden signal with his hand.

The two men exchanged courtesies. Wang looked at Chai Jin. He didn't know him. “My eyesight is poor,” he said. “I'm afraid I don't remember Your Excellence. Would you be good enough to tell me your name?”

Chai Jin smiled. “We were friends as children. You'll think of it without me saying.” He summoned the waiter and ordered wine.

Tasty dishes were served, and Yan Qing saw to it that the attendant's cup remained filled. When the man was half drunk, Chai questioned him.

“What is the meaning of that cockade?”

“Today, the emperor is celebrating the first full moon. There are twenty-four companies of us palace attendants, nearly fifty-eight hundred men in all. We've each been issued a new robe, a cockade in the shape of green leaves and a golden flower, and a small metal badge pinned above it reading: 'Celebrate with the People.' We're on call at all times. Only those with this palace cockade and robe are allowed in.”

“I didn't know that,” said Chai Jin. They downed several more cups, and Chai said to Yan Qing: “Get us a pot of warm wine.”

Before long, Yan brought the wine. Chai Jin rose and addressed Attendant Wang, cup in hand.

“Drink this round I respectfully offer and you'll know my name.”

“I just can't think of it. Please tell me.”

Wang raised his cup and drained it. Almost instantly he began to drool from the corners of his mouth. His feet flailed, and he fell back off his bench. Chai quickly stripped Wang of his head kerchief, clothing and footwear, and put them on, including the cockade and the colored silk robe.

“If the waiter should ask,” he said to Yan Qing, “tell him the attendant is drunk, and that the other gentleman will be back soon.”

“No need to instruct me. I'll handle it.”

Chai Jin left the tavern and went to the East Glory Gate of the palace. Because of the cockade and the color of his robe, no one stopped him from entering. It was a splendid, lavish place of glorious hues, a paradise on earth. Chai passed a number of compounds whose gates were closed and

fastened with golden locks. Then, off to a side, he saw a sign in letters of gold, “Hall of Deep Thought.” This was the imperial library.

Its vermilion doors of ornately carved wood were open. Chai Jin entered. Directly opposite was an imperial chair, flanked by tables on which lay brush-pens with ivory handles, decorated paper, imperial ink-slabs, and the famous grinding stones from Duanxi. Innumerable sets of books lined the walls, each with ivory fastenings. Behind the chair was a screen decorated with a scenic panorama in lovely colors. Chai Jin walked around to the back of the screen. It was blank, except for a listing of the four major outlaws, as follows: “Song Jiang of Shandong, Wang Qing west of the River Huai, Tian Hu of Hebei, Fang La south of the Yangzi.”

“We are the ones who are ravaging the country,” Chai Jin reflected. “It has been written here so that no one will forget.” He drew a concealed knife and cut out the words “Song Jiang of Shandong” and hastily quit the building. Others were already entering.

Chai Jin left the inner grounds, departed through the East Glory Gate, and returned to the tavern. Attendant Wang was still in a drugged slumber. Chai took off Wang's clothes and put on his own. He directed Yan Qing to pay the bill and give the waiter a large tip.

As he and Yan were leaving he said to the waiter: “Attendant Wang and I are close friends. He's drunk, so I signed in for him at the palace. He still hasn't come to, but I have to go outside the city and must leave before the gates close. You can keep the change. Wang's clothing and identification are all here.”

“I'll take care of everything, sir,” the waiter assured him.

Chai and Yan left the tavern and exited from the city through the Wanshou Gate.

Towards evening the attendant awakened, Since his identifying robe and cockade were still with him, he didn't suspect what had happened. The waiter told him what Chai Jin had said. Still befuddled with drink, Wang returned home.

The next day a colleague informed him: “The words 'Song Jiang of Shandong' have been removed from the Hall of Deep Thought. Today security at every gate is as tight as the bands on a bucket. Anyone going in or out is closely checked.”

Wang at last understood. But he didn't dare breathe a word.

On reaching the inn, Chai told in detail what he had seen in the palace, and handed over the “Song Jiang of Shandong” which he had cut from the imperial writing. Song Jiang examined it with many sighs. On the evening of the fourteenth he and several of his men went into the city to view the lanterns.

During the Song Dynasty the Eastern Capital was the leading metropolis. It grew prosperous and rich under the Taoist Sovereign.

At dusk that day a bright moon rose in the east in a cloudless sky. Song Jiang and Chai Jin were disguised as vacationing officials. Dai Zong wore the garb of a lieutenant. Yan Qing tagged along as servant. Only Li Kui remained at the inn.

The four men mingled with the noisy crowds swarming in through the Fengqiu Gate and wandered about the streets and marts. It was a warm evening with gentle breezes, ideal for strolling. On the main thoroughfare sheds had been erected in front of every door and hung with lanterns, which vied for beauty and turned the night into day. The buildings too were decked with lanterns, and the streets thronged with carriages and people.

The four men turned away from Imperial Road to a street lined on both sides with signboards denoting establishments of “misty moonlight.” The four were struck by one house midway down. Its doorway was covered by a blue cloth drape, behind which was a curtain of spotted bamboo. Green silk gauze screened the windows on either side. Between them and the doorway hung two vertical plaques reading: “A Fairy Maid of Song and Dance, A Flower of Surpassing Grace.”

Song Jiang and his companions went into a tea-house opposite and sat down. “Which courtesan's place is that?” they asked the waiter.

“The leading lady of her profession in the Eastern Capital, Li Shishi. And in the house next door to us is Zhao Yuannu.”

“Isn't Li the one who's having a hot affair with the emperor?” Song Jiang asked.

“Not so loud,” said the waiter. “There are eyes and ears all around.”

Song Jiang leaned close to Yan Qing and whispered: “I want to meet Li Shishi and arrange something with her privately. Invent some story to get us in. We'll wait for you here.” He remained with Chai Jin and Dai Zong, drinking tea.

Yan Qing walked up to the door of the courtesan's residence, pushed aside the drape, raised the bamboo curtain, and entered. He saw fine smoke rising from a bronze incense burner on a rhinoceros-hide table beneath a hanging duck and drake lamp. On two of the walls were scenic paintings by four famous artists. Below stood four armchairs, also covered by rhinoceros hide.

There didn't seem to be anyone around. Yan Qing crossed a small courtyard into another parlor. Here were three small beds of ornately carved camphor wood, cushioned with purple mattresses bearing a fallen-petals-in-a-flowing-stream design. A fine lamp hung on a jade stand, here and there were rare antiques.

Yan Qing coughed softly. A serving maid rounded a folding screen, saw Yan Qing and curtsied.

“What is your name, big brother? Where are you from?”

“Can I trouble you, sister, to ask mama to come out? I have something to say.”

The girl left and, a few moments later, returned with the bawd. Yan urged her to be seated. He kowtowed four times. “What is your name, young brother?”

“You've forgotten me, mother. I'm Zhang Xian, son of Zhang the Second. I've been away from the city since childhood. I only returned today.”

Zhang was a very common name. The bawd thought for several moments. She couldn't see the young man clearly in the lamplight. Suddenly, she imagined she remembered.

“Not little Zhang Xian near the Taiping Bridge? Where have you been? I haven't seen you in ages.”

“Of course not. I've been away. Today, I'm looking after a guest from Shandong. He's got more property than words can say. He's probably the richest man in his province. He's here on business. One, he wants to enjoy the lantern festival; two, he's visiting relatives here in the capital; three, he's buying and selling merchandise; and four, he's longing to meet your lady. He asks only to sip tea at the same table, and he'll be satisfied. I wouldn't dare ask otherwise. I'm not kidding —that man has thousands in gold and silver, and he'd like to present some of it to this house.”

The greedy bawd was very fond of money. Yan Qing's story went to her heart. She hastily called out Li Shishi and introduced her to Yan. He could see in the lamplight that the girl truly had a form that could sink fish and down geese, a face that eclipsed the moon and put the flowers to shame. Yan dropped to his knees and kowtowed. The bawd relayed his story to Shishi.

“Where is the gentleman now?” asked the girl.

“In that tea-house across the way,” said Yan.

“Invite him to have some tea here.”

“He wouldn't dare enter without your permission.”

“Hurry over and ask him,” said the bawd.

Yan Qing went to the tea-house and related the news in Song Jiang's ear. Dai Zong paid the bill and the three men followed Yan to the courtesan's

house, On entering, they were escorted to the main parlor, where Li Shishi stood with hands folded demurely.

She greeted Song Jiang politely and said: “Zhang Xian has just been talking about your munificence. Your visit brings luster to our humble dwelling.”

“I'm an ignorant man from an obscure mountain hamlet,” replied Song. “To be able to gaze upon your beauty is my greatest good fortune.” The courtesan asked him to be seated. “Who is this other gentleman?” she queried, indicating Chai Jin.

“My nephew Sheriff Ye,” said Song. He also instructed Dai Zong to greet the girl.

Song Jiang and Chai Jin were ushered to guest seats on the left Side of the table, and Li Shishi took her place on the right, as hostess, while the bawd brought in the tea things. The girl poured for each of the four men personally. The tea leaves were finer than birds' tongues, the brew was as fragrant as dragon's saliva. When they had finished and the tea service was removed, they chatted pleasantly.

The bawd entered and said: “His Majesty is waiting in the rear.”

“I'm afraid I can't keep you any longer, today,” the courtesan said to her guests. “But he's due to visit the Upper Purity Temple soon and won't be able to come here for some time. Once he goes, you gentlemen will be welcome to call again and join me in a few cups of wine.”

Song Jiang bid her a respectful farewell and departed with his three companions.

When they had left her door Chai Jin said: “The emperor has two mistresses, Li Shishi and Zhao Yuannu. We've met one, what about the other?”

They went to the building next to the tea-house and raised the door curtain. Yan Qing spoke to Zhao Yuannu's bawd.

“These two gentlemen are wealthy merchants from Shandong. If they could meet your lady, they would present her with a hundred ounces of silver.”

“My girl hasn't any luck. She's sick in bed and can't receive company.”

“We'll try again another time,” said Song Jiang.

The bawd saw them to the door and bid them farewell. Leaving the street, they headed towards Tianhan Bridge to view the massed lanterns display. As they neared the Fanlou Restaurant building they heard the shrilling of pipes and the beat of drums. Lanterns dazzled the eye, people swarmed in and out like ants.

Song Jiang and Chai Jin went upstairs, found a room and sat down. They ordered drinks and side dishes. Sipping their wine, they admired the lanterns gleaming outside in the night. They had downed only a few cups when they heard someone making up lyrics and singing them in the adjoining room:

Though our courage surges to the stare,

Our heroic task is unfulfilled.

With dragon sword grasped firm in hand,

We won't quit till every scoundrel's killed!

Song Jiang knew that voice. He hastily entered. There was Nine Dragons Shi Jin and Mu Hong the Unrestrained, quite drunk and talking wildly.

“You brothers frightened the wits out of me,” Song Jiang said sharply. “Pay your bill and get out. If it was some policeman instead of me who heard you, you'd have been in a fine mess. I never expected you two to be so careless. Leave the city without delay. After the formal lantern display tomorrow night, I'm leaving too. That's the best way. We don't want to stir up any trouble.”

Shi Jin and Mu Hong had nothing to say. They paid their bill, went down the stairs, and departed from the Eastern Capital.

Song Jiang and his three companions had a few more cups. They were a bit tipsy. Dai Zong paid the bill. Flipping their long sleeves, they left the restaurant. They returned to the inn outside Wanshou Gate and pounded on the door. Li Kui peered at them with sleepy eyes.

“What's the good of letting me come to the Eastern Capital?” he grumbled to Song Jiang. “You only make me stay here and watch the room. While I'm penned up in this friggin place, you fellows are out having a good time.”

“It's because you have a bad disposition and are so ugly. I'm afraid if I take you into the city you'll only create a disturbance.”

“Don't take me, then! Why make a lot of excuses? When did my looks ever scare anybody's family to death?”

“All right, tomorrow night, the fifteenth, and no more. We'll see the lanterns and leave immediately.”

Li Kui laughed happily.

The next day, Lantern Festival Day itself, was bright and clear. Towards evening, huge crowds of celebrants gathered. It was a time of national peace and prosperity, when peasants toiled contentedly in their fields. Song Jiang and Chai Jin, in the guise of vacationing officials, followed by Dai Zong, Li Kui and Yan Qing, went into the city through the Wanshou Gate.

Although there was no curfew that night, each of the gates was guarded by soldiers in full armor, equipped with weapons at the ready. Their bows were strung, their swords were unsheathed, and every post was manned. Five thousand cavalry under the personal command of Marshal Gao Qiu patrolled atop the city walls.

Song Jiang and his four companions jostled through the crowds into the Eastern Capital. He whispered some instructions in Yan Qing's ear, and added: “I'll be waiting in the tea-house.”

Yan Qing went to the home of Li Shishi and knocked on the door. The prime-ranking courtesan and her bawd received him.

“Ask your master, the magnate, to please forgive us,” they said. “We never know when His Majesty is liable to drop in privately. We must be diligent.”

“My master apologizes for disturbing you. Shandong is only a remote province by the sea. It doesn't have anything of value. What it does produce wouldn't be worth presenting to you. All he can do is send you one hundred ounces of gold as a token of his esteem. Perhaps the lady can have ornaments made out of them for her hair. If he comes across something attractive later on, he'll send it with his respects.”

“Where is the magnate now?” asked the bawd.

“He's waiting for me at the end of the lane. We're going to see the lanterns.”

There was nothing the bawd loved more in the world than wealth. When Yan Qing took out two gold nuggets, gleaming like live coals and put them on the table, she was overjoyed.

“This is Lantern Festival Day,” she said, “and my girl and I are celebrating it at home with a few cups of wine. If the magnate wouldn't think our fare too meager, perhaps he'd visit our humble abode for a chat. Do you think he might come?”

“I'm sure he will. I'll pass on your invitation.”

Yan Qing went to the tea-house and informed Song Jiang. They all repaired to the home of Li Shishi. Song Jiang told Dai Zong and Li Kui to wait at the front door.

The three entered the large parlor where Li Shishi received them. “We've only just met,” she said to Song Jiang. “You shouldn't give such an expensive gift. It really isn't right.”

“We have nothing of value in my rustic mountains. I can only offer this trifle as an expression of thanks.”

The courtesan invited them into a small adjoining room, and asked them to be seated. Maids served rare fruits, fine food, vintage wine, and tasty delicacies. The crockery was of the best, the table was laid beautifully. Shishi approached them and bowed, wine cup in hand.

“I must have been lucky in my previous incarnation or I wouldn't be able to meet you two gentlemen today. With this simple wine, I pledge to you, my elders.” Song Jiang said: “Although I have a bit of property in my mountain area, I have never seen anything so lavish as you have here. Your fame is known throughout the land, lovely and charming lady. An interview with you is more difficult to obtain than reaching Heaven. Yet here I am, actually chatting and drinking with you personally!”

“How extremely kind of you, magnate. You praise me too highly. I am unworthy!”

Both drank, and Shishi directed her personal maid to pour wine in tiny gold cups. Then the courtesan relaxed and gossiped about members of her profession. To all her remarks it was Chai Jin who replied. Yan Qing, who was standing off to one side, offered quips that made everyone laugh.

After several rounds Song Jiang became more loquacious. He rolled up his sleeves and gesticulated as he talked in the free manner of the brigands of Mount Liangshan.

“My brother is always like this after he's had some wine,” Chai Jin smiled. “Pray don't laugh at him, lady.”

“Drinking is for pleasure,” said Shishi. “Why stand on ceremony?”

“One of those two servants at the front door,” a young maid said, “the one with the yellow beard who's so weird-looking he scares you, is muttering curses.”

“Tell them both to come in,” said Song Jiang.

Dai Zong soon entered the side room with Li Kui. When the Black Whirlwind saw Song Jiang and Chai Jin sitting and drinking with Shishi, he

glared.

“Who is this fellow?” Shishi asked. “He looks like one of those imps standing before the judge in the temple statuary.”

Everyone laughed except Li Kui. He didn't know what she was talking about.

“He's the son of one of our family servants,” said Song Jiang.

“It doesn't matter,” said the courtesan with a laugh. “I have no refinement.”

“The lout is a skilled warrior,” Song explained. “He can tote two or three hundred catties and fight forty or fifty men.”

Shishi called for large silver flagons and gave Li Kui and Dai Zong three rounds each. Yan Qing was afraid Li Kui would say something coarse, and he directed the two to return to their posts at the front of the house.

“When a real man drinks,” said Song Jiang, “he doesn't use small cups.” He picked up a large silver flagon and downed several rounds.

In a low voice Shishi murmured a song by the poet Su Dongpo to the melody of *Xijiangyue*. His senses heightened by wine, Song Jiang called for brush-pen and paper. He ground the ink thick and black, dipped his pen, and spread the paper.

“Though I have no learning,” he said to the courtesan, “I'd like to scrawl a few words to express the sadness in my heart. I beg of you to hear me, foremost flower.”

Taking up his pen, Song Jiang, then and there composed a *yuefu* poem. It ran as follows:

North and south,

Where under Heaven is there a place for this wild traveller?

My misty mountain stronghold

Is but a base for future status in the imperial capital.

Jade sleeves and swirling incense,

Red brocades and snow-white cuffs...

One smile from you is worth

A thousand ounces of gold.

Fairy maid, your beauty

Is more than I can bear!

Six times six in wild goose formation,

Plus eight times nine,

Waiting only for news

From the Golden Cock.

Our chivalry Heaven-embracing.

Earth-shaking our loyalty,

Yet recognized by none

Within the Four Seas.

Morose and sad at separation,

I drink,

And in a single night

My hair turns white.

When he had finished, he handed the poem to Li Shishi. She read it a few times, but didn't understand. He was about to explain when the courtesan's personal maid entered.

“His Majesty has arrived at the rear door through the tunnel,” she announced.

“I won't be able to see you off,” Shishi said hastily to her guests. “Please forgive me.” She hurried to receive the emperor.

The young maid quickly gathered the cups and utensils, carried away the small table, and swept the floor. Song Jiang and the others concealed themselves in a dark corner of the side room. From it they could see Shishi in the parlor kneeling before the sovereign.

“Your Majesty must be weary from affairs of state.”

The emperor's head was covered by a silk gauze kerchief in the Tang style. He wore an imperial dragon robe.

“I've just returned from the Upper Purity Temple,” he said. “I directed my son the prince to dispense wine to the populace at Xuande House and my younger brother to attend the fair at the Thousand Paces Esplanade. I had arranged to meet Marshal Yang, but he never showed up, though I waited a long time. So I came here. Approach, beloved, let us talk together.”

“If we miss this chance, we may never get another,” Song Jiang whispered to his cohorts in the darkness. “Why don't we three go forward and beseech an amnesty? What would be wrong with that?”

“Impossible!” said Chai Jin. “Even if he agreed, he could always reverse himself later.”

Meanwhile, Li Kui's wrath was growing. Song Jiang and Chai Jin had sat drinking with the beauty, but he and Dai Zong had been sent to watch the door! Li Kui's hackles rose. His fury reached a boiling point.

Just then, Marshal Yang raised the hanging screen and pushed open the double doors. He was about to Step in when his eyes Ml on Li Kui, Standing inside the entry.

“Who are you, knave? How dare you come here?” he barked.

Without a word, Li Kui picked up an armchair and flung it at Yang's head. The startled marshal tumbled backwards, knocking over another two chairs. Dai Zong rushed to intervene, but he was too late. Li Kui ripped pictures off the wall and set fire to them with a candle. Smashing left and right, he spread the blaze. Incense table, chairs, benches—he pulverized them all.

Song Jiang and his companions hurried out when they heard the tumult. They found the Black Whirlwind, stripped to the waist, going on a rampage. By the time they got outside the door, Li Kui was tearing down the street with a cudgel he had grabbed somewhere. Song Jiang decided to leave the city immediately with Chai Jin and Dai Zong, lest the gates be closed before they could escape. He directed Yan Qing to remain behind and look after Li Kui.

The moment the fire broke out in Li Shishi's home, the emperor was off like a streak of smoke. Neighbors who hurried to fight the blaze also rescued Marshal Yang. Of that no more need be said.

The sounds of the yelling and shouting reached Marshal Gao, who was patrolling above the North Gate. He hastened down with his soldiers to give chase. Li Kui, battling madly, ran into Mu Hong and Shi Jin. They were joined by Yan Qing, and the four fought their way to the inner side of the city wall.

Soldiers rushed to close the gate. But from the outside up charged Sagacious Lu with his iron staff, Wu Song with his double swords, and Zhu Tong and Liu Tang, swinging halberds. They hacked a path into the city and saved their four mates.

They got through the gate just about the time Gao and his mounted force were reaching it. Song Jiang, Chai Jin and Dai Zong had vanished. The eight chieftains grew alarmed.

Now it so happened that Wu Yong, the outlaws' military advisor, suspecting Song Jiang would have difficulty, had decided to raid the Eastern Capital. He fixed a time and dispatched a thousand armored cavalry under the five Tiger Chieftains. In the outskirts they met Song Jiang, Chai Jin and Dai Zong, and provided them with horses they had brought for that purpose. Then the other eight arrived and were also given mounts. But there was no sign of Li Kui.

Marshal Gao and men were preparing to charge forth. Five of Song Jiang's commanders—Guan Sheng, Lin Chong, Qin Ming, Huyan Zhuo and Dong Ping, galloped up to the edge of the moat.

“All the gallants of Mount Liangshan are here,” they shouted. “Surrender the city and save yourselves from death!”

Gao dared not come out. He hurriedly pulled up the drawbridge and retreated with his soldiers to defensive positions atop the city wall.

“You're Li Kui's best friend,” Song Jiang said to Yan Qing. “Wait for the swarthy oaf and bring him back. I want to return to the stronghold with our men tonight before the foe can intercept us.”

Song Jiang and the outlaws departed. Yan Qing, watching beneath the eaves of a house, saw Li Kui emerging from the inn with his luggage on his back. An ax in either hand, he leaped forth from the inn gate with a yell and headed, alone, to attack the Eastern Capital.

Truly, he left the inn roaring like thunder, flourishing axes to split the city gate.

How did Li Kui the Black Whirlwind assault the Eastern Capital? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 73
Black Whirlwind Pretends to Catch a Spirit
The Mount Liangshan Hero Presents Two Heads

Yan Qing flung his arms around Li Kui's waist. With one twist, he threw him to the ground, head down and feet to the sky. Yan Qing then dragged him up, let go, and strode off along a path. Li Kui followed.

Why did Li Kui go with him? Because Yan Qing was the first among wrestlers. For that reason Song Jiang had dispatched him to control Li Kui. If the Black Whirlwind didn't listen, Yan Qing needed only one swift motion to floor him. Li Kui had had more than one taste of his hands and feet. He was afraid of Yan Qing and had to obey.

They dared not travel the highway. If pursuing government troops caught up, they'd have a hard time resisting. They made a wide detour in the direction of Chenliu County. Li Kui put on his clothes again and concealed his axes beneath them. Since he had no head kerchief, he parted his scorched-brown hair and did it up in two buns in the manner of a Taoist priest. They walked until daylight. Yan Qing had some money, and bought meat and wine in a village tavern. After eating, they continued on.

In the Eastern Capital that morning, confusion reigned. Marshal Gao led troops forth, but they were unable to apprehend the fugitives and had to return. Li Shishi claimed she knew nothing about anything. Marshal Yang also came back and rested. A check revealed that four or five hundred people in the city had been injured. Innumerable others, who had fallen or been knocked down, suffered bruises and contusions. Gao met with Tong Guan, head of the Council of Military Affairs, and they both conferred with the premier about petitioning the emperor. Troops were sent to pursue and catch the outlaws.

As to Li Kui and Yan Qing they reached a village called Four Willows. It was already late in the day, and they approached a large manor and knocked on the gates. They were ushered to a thatch-roofed hall, where Squire Di, who owned the manor, received them. He saw the buns of hair on Li Kui's head, but observed that he was not wearing a Taoist gown and was very ugly. Not knowing what to make of him, the squire addressed himself to Yan Qing.

“Where does this reverend come from?”

Yan Qing laughed. “He's a strange person. None of you have ever heard of him. We'd like something to eat, and to spend the night. We'll leave in the morning.”

Li Kui didn't speak. The squire kowtowed before him.

“Help me, Reverend,” he pleaded.

“What do you want me to do? Tell me frankly.”

“There are over a hundred people in this household, including my wife and my twenty-year-old daughter. For the last six months the girl has been possessed by a spirit. She never leaves her room, and doesn't even come out to eat. If anyone tries to go near her, he's showered with bricks and stones. Many of us have been hurt. We've had the magistrate down several times, but he's never been able to catch the spirit.”

“Squire, I'm a disciple of Abbot Lou of Qizhou. I know how to ride the clouds and capture demons. If you don't mind spending a bit, I'll nab him for you tonight. I'll need a pig and a sheep, first, for sacrifice purposes.”

“We've got all the pigs and sheep you want, to say nothing of wine.”

“Pick a couple of fat ones, and slaughter and roast them, and bring them here. I need also a few bottles of good wine, to make my arrangements. Tonight, at the third watch, I'll capture your spirit.”

“If you want any written prayers or paper paraphernalia, Reverend, I have some.”

“I've got my own magic. I don't need any of that friggin stuff. I'll just go to her room and snatch him.”

Yan Qing could barely restrain his laughter. The squire had nothing but praise for Li Kui.

By midnight the roasted animals were laid out in the hall. Black Whirlwind called for a large bowl, and lined up a dozen bottles of heated wine. He lit two candles and ignited good incense in a burner. Then he dragged over a bench and sat down in the middle. But instead of reciting prayers, he pulled out one of his axes, hacked open the pig and sheep, and proceeded to tear off large chunks and eat them.

“Join me, young Prodigy,” he said magnanimously.

Yan Qing only smiled coldly, and Li Kui continued gorging until he was full of meat and had consumed five or six bowls of fin wine, to the astonishment of the squire.

“Share this bounty with me,” Li Kui said to the squire's vassals. In the twinkling of an eye he handed out the remaining meat. “Bring a bucket of warm water. I want to wash my hands and feet,” he directed.

His orders were soon obeyed. After completing his ablutions, he demanded tea from the squire and said to Yan Qing: “Have you eaten yet?”

“I've had plenty,” Yan Qing replied.

“We've finished the wine and meat, and tomorrow we must be on our way,” Li Kui said to the squire. “We lords are going to sleep now.”

“But this is terrible,” cried the squire. “When are you going to catch the spirit?”

“You really want me to do that? Then lead me to your daughter's room.”

“But that's where the demon is. Bricks and stones come flying out. Who dares to go!”

Li Kui grasped his two axes and directed men to stand with torches at a distance and light his path. He strode up to the house. It was faintly illuminated inside by a lamp. He peered in. A young fellow was holding a girl in his arms and they were talking.

With one kick the Black Whirlwind burst open the door and charged in swinging his axes. The lamp seemed to leap into a thousand slivers of light, shattered by Li Kui's blow. They young man tried to flee. Li Kui yelled, and hacked him down. The girl plunged under the bed and hid. Li Kui cut the man's head off, carried it over to the bed, and rapped on the frame with his ax.

“Come out, quick, woman. Otherwise I'll chop you and this bed to pieces.”

“Spare me, I'll come out!”

No sooner had the girl poked her head out than Li Kui grabbed her by the hair and pulled her over beside the corpse. “Who is this fellow I've killed?” he demanded.

“Young Wang, my lover.”

“Where did the bricks come from, and the food you ate?”

“I used to give him my gold and silver hairpins, and he would slip over the manor wall late at night and buy things.”

“You filthy slut, what use are you!” Li Kui dragged her to the bed and cut her head off. He tied the two heads together by their hair, then placed the bodies side by side.

“I had a full meal. I need some exercise to help digest it.” He stripped to the waist and flailed the two bodies with his axes as if he was drumming. Li Kui grinned. “That pair won't come back to life.”

He stuck his axes into his girdle, picked up the heads, and returned to the hall. “I've caught two demons,” he shouted, flinging down the heads.

The whole manor, astonished, gathered round to stare. They recognized the squire's daughter, but they didn't know who the other head belonged to. Finally, one of the vassals spoke.

“He looks something like Young Wang the bird-catcher from East Village.”

“You've got sharp eyes,” said Li Kui.

“How did you find out, Reverend?” asked the squire.

“Your daughter was hiding under the bed. I hauled her out and questioned her. She confessed he was her lover, Young Wang. Their food, he used to bring in. After I got all the information, I took action.”

The squire wept. “Reverend, you should have spared my daughter.”

“Stupid old ox! Your daughter takes a lover and you want me to spare her! Instead of thanking me, you weep and blame me. I'll settle with you tomorrow.”

Yan Qing found a room, and he and Li Kui retired.

The squire led a group of people with lanterns and candles into his daughter's room. They saw the dismembered parts of the headless bodies scattered all over the floor. The squire and his wife wept distractedly. They ordered that the bodies be taken to the rear and burned.

Li Kui slept until daybreak. He jumped out of bed and sought the squire.

“Yesterday, I caught the spirit for you. Why don't you show your thanks?”

Squire Di had no choice but to wine and dine him. After Li Kui and Yan Qing finished eating, they left. The squire went back to managing his manor.

On departing from Four Willows Village Li Kui and Yan Qing set out again along the road. This time of the year the grass was withered and the fields denuded, branches had fallen and the hills were empty.

The journey was uneventful. They continued in a wide detour towards the northern end of Liangshan Marsh. They were still seventy or eighty *li* from the stronghold, not far from the town of Jingmen. The mountain was not yet

in sight, and it was growing late. They went up to a large manor, knocked on the gate, and asked for shelter.

“Why don't we find an inn and put up there?” said Yan Qing.

“We're much better off with a leading family like this,” Li Kui retorted.

Before the words were out of his mouth, the vassal returned and said: “My master the squire is very distraught. You two had better rest someplace else.”

Li Kui barged right in and headed for the thatch-roofed hall. Yan Qing was unable to restrain him.

“Passing travellers ask to spend the night,” Black Whirlwind bellowed. “What's so friggin important that it's got your squire all upset! I want to speak to him.”

The squire, peering out, saw how fierce Li Kui looked. He sent a man to invite him to a wing of the hall. There, a side room was provided for the two visitors. Later, a meal was served, after which they went to bed.

Not having had any wine, Li Kui couldn't sleep. As he tossed and turned on the earthen *kang*, he heard the squire and his wife, in the adjoining room, weeping and sobbing. Thoroughly irritated, Li Kui didn't close his eyes a minute.

When at last it was light, he jumped out of bed and strode to the front of the hall. “Who was crying all night and preventing this lord from sleeping?” he demanded.

The squire heard him, He came out and explained: “We have an eighteen-year-old daughter and someone has taken her. That's why we're upset.”

“Stupid old ox. All boys and girls must marry when they reach a certain age. What's there to be upset about?”

“We don't agree to the match. He snatched her away by force.”

“More funny business! Who is the man?”

“When I tell you you'll fart and pee in your pants with terror. He's the supreme commander of Liangshan Marsh, Song Jiang. One hundred and eight bold fellows are the chieftains there, and they have a considerable army.”

“What I want to know is how many of them came here?”

“Two days ago, their leader arrived with a young fellow, both riding horses.”

Li Kui called Yan Qing over. “Listen to this old man. It seems our Big Brother says one thing and does another. He's not a good person.”

“Big Brother wouldn't commit wrong. I'm sure there's nothing in this.”

“Didn't he go to the house of that Li Shishi in the Eastern Capital? Why wouldn't he pull something dirty here?” Li Kui turned to the squire. “You've got food in your manor. We want to eat. I'm Li Kui the Black Whirlwind of Liangshan Marsh. This is Yan Qing the Prodigy. If Song Jiang has taken your daughter, we'll bring her back.”

The squire kowtowed his thanks.

The two returned to the mountain fortress. The trip was without incident. They went directly to Loyalty Hall, where Song Jiang received them.

“Where have you been, brothers,” he queried. “You must have lost your way many times to be coming back only now.”

Li Kui glared. Without a word he took his axes and cut down the apricot-yellow banner inscribed with “Act in Heaven's Behalf and ripped it to shreds. Everyone stared in amazement.

“What are you doing, you swarthy rogue?” Song Jiang shouted. Axes in hand, Li Kui charged across the hall towards Song Jiang. Guan Sheng, Lin Chong, Qin Ming, Huyan Zhuo and Dong Ping hurriedly blocked him, wrenched away his axes, and hustled him to the lower end of the chamber.

“That oaf is acting up again,” Song Jiang cried angrily. He turned to Black Whirlwind. “Tell me, what have I done wrong?”

Li Kui was speechless with rage. Yan Qing stepped forward and related what had transpired from the time they left the Eastern Capital to their arrival at the manor near Jingmen.

“Squire Liu told us that two days ago Song Jiang and a young companion rode up to the manor,” Yan Qing continued. “When he heard that they were men who acted in Heaven's behalf, he ordered his eighteen-year-old daughter to serve them wine. They ate and drank far into the night, then ran off with the daughter. Brother Li Kui, hearing this story, believed it to be true. I kept telling him: 'Big Brother isn't that kind of a person. Somebody must be impersonating him, and misbehaving in his name.' But Brother Li said: 'I saw him in the Eastern Capital hanging around that hussy Li Shishi like he couldn't bear to part. Of course he's the man.' That's why he's so furious.”

“You've got it all wrong about Li Shishi. I didn't realize,” Song exclaimed to Li Kui. “Why didn't you say something?”

“I considered you a chivalrous man. Who'd have thought you were such an animal! Imagine doing a thing like that!”

“Listen to me: I came back in the company of three thousand cavalry. If two horsemen dropped out, everyone would have noticed. And if I captured a woman, she'd be here in the stronghold. You can search my house, goon!”

“That's friggin nonsense, brother, and you know it. Every man in the fortress is under your command, and most of them would cover for you. She could be hidden anywhere. I used to respect you for not being a skirt-chaser. Actually, you're crazy about wine and women. Your killing of Yan Poxi was just a little show. The real thing was when you lusted after Li Shishi in the Eastern Capital. Don't try to deny it. Return his daughter to old Squire Liu, and we can still come to terms. If you don't, sooner or later I'll kill you.”

“Take it easy. Squire Liu isn't dead yet, and all his vassals are still there. I'll go and confront him. If he identifies me as the man, I'll stick out my neck for your ax. If he says I'm not the culprit, what should your penalty be, disrespectful varlet?”

“If I can't pin this on you, you can have my head.”

“Good. All you brothers are witnesses.” Song Jiang directed Ironclad Virtue Pei Xuan to write out two orders of execution as pledges for the bet, and each man signed one. Song Jiang handed his pledge to Li Kui. Black Whirlwind gave his to Song Jiang.

“That young fellow the squire spoke of must be Chai Jin,” said Li Kui. “It can't be anyone else.”

“I'll go too, then,” said Chai Jin.

“That you will, never fear. If the squire identifies you, you'll get a taste of my axes, too, lord or no lord!”

“That's all right with me,” said Chai Jin. “You go first and we'll follow, so there won't be any funny business.”

“Right,” said Li Kui. He called to Yan Qing. “We'll go on ahead. If they don't come, it's because they know they're guilty. We'll come back and have this out!”

Yan Qing and Li Kui proceeded to the manor. “Any news, bold fellows?” the squire asked.

“Our Song Jiang is coming here today for you to identify him,” said the Black Whirlwind. “I want you and your wife and your vassals to take a good look. If it's him, speak up, don't be afraid. I'll be responsible.”

A vassal announced: “A dozen horsemen are at the gates.”

“That's them,” said Li Kui.

While the others waited outside, Song Jiang and Chai Jin entered. They went directly to the thatch-roofed hall and sat down. Li Kui stood to one side with his axes, ready to strike as soon as the old man recognized the culprit. But Squire Liu walked over to Song Jiang and kowtowed.

“Is this the man who kidnapped your daughter?” the Black Whirlwind queried.

Squire Liu opened wide his weak old eyes and examined Song Jiang carefully. “No.”

“What do you say to that?” Song Jiang asked Li Kui. “You two gave him a look and scared him. He doesn't dare speak.”

“Call his vassals, then, and ask them.'

Li Kui summoned the vassals. In one voice they all said: “He's not the man.”

“Squire Liu,” said Song Jiang, “I am Song Jiang of Liangshan Marsh. This brother is Chai Jin. Your daughter was probably kidnapped by an impostor. If you find out where she's gone, let our stronghold know. We'll take care of it for you.”

To Li Kui he said: “This is no place for us to talk. When you get back to the fortress I'll have something to say.” He and Chaj Jin and their escort left first for the stronghold on the mountain.

“A fine mess, brother,” said Yan Qing.

“It's my fault for being too impatient. Since I've forfeited my head, I might as well cut it off and have you present it to Big Brother.”

“You've no reason to kill yourself. I have a way out. It's called 'Bearing the Thomstick and Requesting Punishment'.”

“What do you mean by 'Bearing the Thomstick'?”

“You remove your clothes, have your hands tied, carry a thomstick on your bare back, and prostrate yourself before Loyalty Hall. You call out: 'Let Big Brother beat me as he will.' Of course, he won't have the heart. That's 'Bearing the Thomstick and Requesting Punishment'.”

“Not bad, but it's kind of embarrassing. I'd rather cut my head off and get it over with.”

“All of us in the stronghold are your brothers. Who would laugh at you?”

Reluctantly, Li Kui returned with Yan Qing to the fortress.

Song Jiang and Chai Jin reached Loyalty Hall first. They were just talking about Li Kui with the other chieftains when they saw him approaching. He was buff naked, and on his back he bore a thomstick. He knelt mutely outside the hall, with lowered head.

“Why are you bearing a thomstick, you swarthy scoundrel?” Song Jiang smiled. “Do you think that way I'll have to let you off?”

“I was wrong. Take this big stick and beat me, brother.”

“I bet against your head. Why bring me a thomstick?”

“If you won't forgive, brother, cut my head off. It will be what I deserve.”

The chieftains all apologized on Li Kui's behalf. “I'll forgive him on one condition: that he capture the two impersonators and find Squire Liu's daughter and bring her home.”

Li Kui jumped to his feet. “I'm off. It'll be as easy as catching turtles in a jug. I only have to put out my hand.”

“There are two of them, and they're mounted. You're all alone. How are you going to get near them? Take Yan Qing along.”

“I'll be pleased to go, brother, if those are your orders,” said Yan Qing.

He went to his quarters and got his bow and a staff as tall as his eyebrows. With Li Kui he went once again to the manor of Squire Liu.

Yan Qing questioned him carefully. “They came when the sun was in the west,” said the squire, “and left at the third watch. I don't know where they went. I didn't dare follow. The leader was short, thin, and dark-complected. The other was a big strong fellow, with a short beard and large eyes.”

The two chieftains queried further, then said: “Don't worry, squire. We're going to return your daughter to you, come what may. Our Big Brother Song Jiang has ordered us to find her, and we must obey.”

They asked for boiled meat and steamed muffins and put these in ration bags which they slung across their shoulders. Leaving the manor, they first searched due north. It was a desolate area, devoid of human habitation. In two days they found not a trace of their quarry.

Next they tried the east. A two-day search proved fruitless, though they ranged as far as Gaotang in Lingzhou Prefecture. Li Kui grew more irritable, and his face was flushed as they turned around and headed west. But in the next two days they again discovered nothing.

That night the two took shelter in an ancient temple at the foot of a hill, and bedded down on the big altar table. Li Kui, too annoyed to sleep, sat up. He heard someone walking by, outside. He jumped down from the table, opened the temple door, and looked. A man with a halberd was staring up the hill behind the temple. Li Kui followed.

Yan Qing, who heard him moving about, took his bow and staff and caught up with Black Whirlwind. “Don't chase him, brother,” he said. “I have another way.”

It was night, and the moon was hazy. Yan Qing handed his staff to Li Kui. The man was now some distance away, head down, walking rapidly. Yan Qing soon narrowed the gap between them until he was fairly close behind. Fitting an arrow to his bow, he pulled the string tight and let fly, crying. “Bow, don't fail me!” The arrow struck the man in the right leg and brought him down.

Li Kui raced forward, seized the fellow by the collar and hauled him back to the temple. “Where have you hidden Squire Liu's daughter?” he yelled.

“I don't know anything about it, sir,” the man replied. “I haven't taken anyone's daughter. I'm only a petty highwayman, doing a very modest business. I wouldn't dare go in for anything big, like snatching a man's daughter.”

Black Whirlwind tied the fellow securely and raised his axes menacingly. “If you don't tell the truth I'll cut you into twenty pieces!”

“Let me up and we'll talk this over,” the man exclaimed.

“I'll remove the arrow from-you,” said Yan Qing. He allowed the man to rise. “Frankly, now, who was it who stole Squire Liu's daughter? Though you're only a highwayman, you must have heard something.”

“I'm only guessing, I don't actually know. But about fifteen *li* northwest of here is a place called Ox Head Mountain, and on it is an old Taoist temple. Recently, two tough characters, one named Wang Jiang and the other Dong Hai, both minor bandits in the greenwood, killed all the priests and acolytes in the temple, and moved in with their gang. There are only six or seven of them. They specialize in robbery and plunder. Wherever they go, the leader calls himself Song Jiang. My guess is that the two chiefs have taken the girl.”

“There's reason in what you say,” Yan Qing averred. “Don't be afraid of us. I'm Yan Qing the Prodigy of Liangshan Marsh, and this is Black Whirlwind Li Kui. I'll treat your arrow wound, and you lead us to where those two are staying.”

“All right,” said the man.

Yan Qing returned his halberd and bound his wound. Then, in the light of the hazy moon, supported by Yan Qing and Li Kui, the man conducted them along the road for fifteen *li.* They came in sight of the mountain. It wasn't very high, and did indeed resemble a reclining ox with its head on the ground.

As the three began climbing, the sky was not yet light. At the top they found an area enclosed by an earthen wall. Within was a moderately sized building of about twenty rooms.

“I'll go in and have a look,” said Black Whirlwind.

“Better wait till daylight,” Yan Qing advised.

But Li Kui had no patience. He jumped over the wall. Someone shouted. The door of the house opened, and a man with a halberd rushed out and charged Li Kui. Afraid that their rescue operation would be ruined, Yan Qing, holding his staff, also leaped the wall. The wounded highwayman streaked away like a wisp of smoke.

Yan Qing crept up to the bruiser who was fighting with Li Kui and cracked him on the cheekbone with his staff, knocking him into Li Kui's arms. With one whack of his ax on the fellow's back, the Black Whirlwind felled him to the ground. Not another person emerged from the building.

“There must be a rear exit,” said Yan Qing. “I'll guard the back door and you watch the front. Don't go blundering in.”

Yan Qing hid in the darkness beside the rear gate of the wall. He saw a man open the back door of the house and approach the rear gate with a key in his hand. Yan Qing advanced to meet him. The man spotted Yan Qing and skirted around the house towards the front.

“Stop him,” Yan Qing yelled.

Li Kui dashed up and planted his ax in the man's chest. He cut the heads off the two bodies and tied them together. His blood lust aroused, he charged into the building, bowling men over like clay idols. Several of them cowered beside the stove. With one blow of his ax each, the Black Whirlwind dispatched them all.

In a room in the center of the building, sure enough, they found the girl, sobbing on a bed. She had misty hair and a flowery complexion. An alluring beauty.

“Aren't you Squire Liu's daughter?” said Yan Qing. “I am,” the girl replied. “About ten days ago two robbers brought me here, and took turns ravishing me every night. I wept constantly and wanted to kill myself, but they watched me very closely. Now you two generals have saved me. You're like my father and mother reborn.”

“Where are their two horses?”

“In the east wing.”

Yan Qing saddled the animals and led them out. He collected the gold and silver hidden in the house—about five thousand ounces—and told the girl to mount. He wrapped up the money and tied it, along with the two heads, on the other beast.

Li Kui twisted grass into a torch, lit it on a lamp below a window of the building, and set the thatched roof afire from four sides. Then they pushed open the wall gate, escorted the girl down the mountain, and delivered her to the manor.

Her parents were overjoyed. All their cares vanished. They couldn't kowtow and thank the two chieftains enough.

“Don't thank us,” said Yan Qing. “Go up to the fortress and thank our Big Brother Song Jiang.”

The two refused the wine and food offered. They mounted the horses and hastened back to the stronghold. By the time they traversed the three fortified passes the rising sun was just crimsoning the rim of the mountains. They led the animals, laden with gold and silver and the two heads, directly to Loyalty Hall. Yan Qing reported to Song Jiang what had transpired.

Very pleased, Song Jiang ordered that the heads be buried, the gold and silver placed in the treasury, and the horses cared for with the rest of the cavalry steeds.

A feast was given the next day to congratulate Yan Qing and Li Kui. Squire Liu brought gold and silver to Loyalty Hall and tried to present it to Song

Jiang in thanks. But Song Jiang would have none of it. After the wining and dining, he told the squire to take the money back with him to the manor.

Of that we'll say no more. A period of peace settled upon the mountain fortress.

Time passed quickly. Soon the willows were gosling yellow, gradually the river waves were a turquoise green. The cheeks of the peaches glowed pink, the faces of the apricots showed a faint smile. On the mountain, front and rear, flowers began to sprout, branches started to bud. Life returned to the duckweed on the ponds and the reeds along the shores. It was a time of grain rains and clearing skies, of the mellow, comfortable weather of the third lunar month.

As Song Jiang was quietly seated one day, he saw a group of men being led up from below the pass under armed escort. An outlaw arrived first and reported: “We've captured some fellows who are built like oxen. They have seven or eight handcarts and a number of staves.”

The captives—big, hulking men—knelt at the lower end of the hall. “We're from Fengxiang District,” they said, “and we're on a pilgrimage to Tai'an Prefecture to burn incense. The twenty-eighth of this month is the anniversary of the birth of the Emperor of Heaven. We're also going to take part in the staves contest. It lasts for three days, and there'll be hundreds of competitors. This year the famous wrestler Ren Yuan of Taiyuan will be there. He's ten feet tall and calls himself the Sky-Supporting Pillar. 'No one can match me,' he boasts. 'I'm the best wrestler in the world.' We hear he's been undefeated in the temple fair contests for the past two years, and has won some valuable prizes. He's put up an announcement, offering to take on all comers. We thought we might see him in action, and also pick up a few pointers on fighting with staves. Pray, great chieftain, favor us with your benevolence.”

Song Jiang summoned a junior officer. “Take these men down the mountain at once. They're not to be harmed. From now on you're not to frighten

persons on their way to burn incense in temples or returning. Let them pass freely.”

The travellers kowtowed and thanked Song Jiang for sparing their lives, and departed.

Yan Qing then approached and said a few brief words. And as a result, all of Tai'an Prefecture was alarmed, and the county of Xiangfu was thrown into turmoil. Truly, two tigers battled in the Temple of the East Sacred Mountain, a pair of dragons fought in Jianing Hall.

What is it that Yan Qing said? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 74
Yan Qing Cleverly Defeats Sky-Supporting Pillar
Li Kui Plays the Magistrate in Shouzhang County

Although the last of the thirty-six Stars of Heavenly Spirits, Yan Qing was more quick-witted, well-informed, and adaptable than the other thirty-five. He addressed Song Jiang.

“Since childhood I have followed Lu Junyi the Magnate and learned from him the art of wrestling. In all the gallant fraternity, I have never met my match. Now there is a good opportunity. It will soon be the twenty-eighth of the third lunar month. I would like to go, alone, to the competition platform and try my skill against the Sky-Supporting Pillar. If I lose, I don't care if I die in the process. If I win, I'll earn a bit of glory for Big Brother. It's sure to stir up plenty of excitement. Maybe you could send some men to support me.”

“I hear the fellow is ten feet tall,” said Song Jiang, “as solid as steel, and enormously strong. You're short and thin. I know your technique is good, but how will you ever get near him?”

“His height and huskiness don't bother me. I'm only afraid he won't fall for my tricks. 'In wrestling use strength if you've got, use wiles if you've not,' as the old saying goes. I'm not boasting, but I'm very quick to seize an advantage. I won't necessarily lose to that big lout.”

Lu Junyi the Magnate said: “This young Prodigy has indeed been good at wrestling since an early age. Let him go if he wants to. After the contest I'll see to it that he gets back.”

“When do you want to leave?” Song Jiang asked Yan Qing.

“Today's the twenty-fourth. I'll bid you farewell tomorrow, brother. The journey will take a day or so. I'll reach the temple fair grounds on the twenty-sixth and spend the twenty-seventh inquiring around. Then, on the twenty-eighth, I'll fight him.”

The following day, Song Jiang gave Yan Qing a farewell banquet. He was dressed like a rustic, but he wore embroidered clothes under his simple padded robe. Disguised as a Shandong pedlar, he had a drum-rattle tucked in his sash and carried his merchandise on a long shoulder-pole. The chieftains laughed at his appearance.

“Since you're made up as a pedlar,” said Song Jiang, “give us a Shandong pedlar's song.”

Yan Qing complied, twirling his drum-rattle in one hand, and beating out rhythm with wooden clappers in the other, giving a very creditable imitation. Everyone laughed. They drank till all were pleasantly mellow. Then Yan Qing took leave of the chieftains and went down the mountain. Crossing at the Shore of Golden Sands, he struck out along the road to Tai'an Prefecture.

Towards evening, as he was looking for an inn to spend the night, he heard a voice shouting behind him: “Brother Prodigy, wait for me!”

Yan Qing rested his carrying-pole and looked. Li Kui the Black Whirlwind was hastening after him.

“What do you want?” Yan Qing demanded.

“You stayed with me twice when I went to Jingmen Town. I saw you leave alone and I was worried about you. So I didn't ask Big Brother's permission, but just sneaked off to keep you company.”

“I don't need you. Go on back.”

“You're a fine one! I come to help you, and you act like that. I'm friggin well going with you!”

Yan Qing couldn't be ungracious in the face of Li Kui's chivalrous concern. “I don't mind your coming along,” he said, “but they'll be celebrating the Emperor of Heaven's birthday and the town will be jammed with people from all over. Many of them might recognize you. I'll let you come on three conditions.”

“All right.”

“On the road we walk one before and one behind, and when we put up at an inn you're not to leave the door. That's one. Two, when we stop at an inn near the fair grounds you're to play sick. Cover your head with your quilt and pretend to snore. Don't make any other sound. Three, the day of the contest when you stand among the watching crowd, you're not to raise any rumpus. Brother, can you agree to that?”

“Easy! I'll do anything you say.”

That night, they slept at an inn. They rose the next day before dawn, paid the bill, travelled a distance, and cooked breakfast.

“You go on ahead half a *li,* brother,” said Yan Qing, “and I'll follow.”

There were many people on the road going to the temple to burn incense, or returning. Several talked about the redoubtable Ren Yuan. “For two years he hasn't been beaten at the East Sacred Mountain Temple fair,” they said. “This is going to be the third year.”

Yan Qing listened. He would remember that. In late afternoon, as he neared the temple, he saw other travellers stopping by the roadside and reading something. He rested his load, pushed through the gathering to the front and looked. Stretched across two upright red poles like an ornate street arch was a pink signboard. On it was written: “Sky-Supporting Pillar Ren Yuan of Taiyuan, Wrestler.” In smaller script on either side were the words:

“Puncher of the fierce tiger on the South Mountain, kicker of the writhing dragon in the North Sea.”

Yan Qing raised his carrying-pole and smashed the board to splinters. Without a word he again shouldered his pole and proceeded towards the temple. Several of the watchers, eager to stir up excitement, flew to Ren Yuan and reported that a man had shattered his signboard in challenge.

Yan Qing caught up with Li Kui and they looked for an inn. The temple fair was very lively. A hundred and twenty trades were all displaying their wares, fourteen to fifteen hundred inns were welcoming guests from many different parts, and a goodly number were full at this festival time. Yan Qing and Li Kui finally found a place at the far edge of the fair grounds. The prodigy rested his load, while Black Whirlwind rolled himself up in a quilt on the bed.

“A pedlar from Shandong come to do some business at the fair, are you, brother?” said the inn attendant. “I wonder if you have enough money for the room?”

“You shouldn't underestimate people,” said Yan Qing, in the manner of a country bumpkin. “How much can a little room cost? Even if it were a large room, whatever others give, I can pay the same.”

“Don't be offended, brother. This is our busiest season. It's better to have a clear understanding, first.”

“This is a business trip. It doesn't matter about me. I can sleep anywhere. But I met this relative from my home village on the road, and he's come down with asthma. I've brought him to your inn so that he can rest. Here are five strings of cash, on account. Go to the kitchen and make us something to eat. I'll give you a tip when we leave.”

The attendant took the money and went out to prepare the food. Of that no more need be said.

Not long after there was a hubbub at the inn door, and twenty or thirty big fellows entered. “What room is the man in who smashed the signboard as a

challenge?” they asked the attendant.

“We don't have any such person.”

“Everyone says he's here.”

“We've only two rooms for rent. One is empty. The other is occupied by a Shandong pedlar and his sick relation.”

“It's the pedlar who smashed the sign.”

“Don't make me laugh! He's a slim young fellow. What use would a challenge from him be!”

“Take us to his room and let's have a look at him.”

“It's that room down in the corner.”

The men walked over, but the door was locked. They peered in through the window. All they could see was the feet of two men, sleeping. They didn't know what to think.

One of them said: “Since he had the courage to smash the sign and challenge the champion, he's surely no ordinary person. He's afraid someone will try to harm him before the match, so he pretends to be sick.”

“That's probably it,” the others agreed. “But there's no use guessing. We'll see when the time comes.”

By dusk at least twenty or thirty such groups had called at the inn to inquire. The attendant's lips were dry and cracked with denials. That evening, when he brought the two guests their food, Li Kui poked his head out of the bedding.

“Aiya!” the attendant yelped. “The challenger!”

“He isn't the challenger. He's sick,” said Yan Qing. “I'm the one who's challenging.”

“Don't kid me. Ren Yuan could swallow you in a single gulp.”

“You needn't smile. I have a trick that will hand you all a good laugh. When I come back from the match, I'll give you a present.”

When the two had finished eating, the attendant collected the bowls and dishes and took them to wash in the kitchen. He didn't believe a word of what the Prodigy had told him.

The next morning, while they were having breakfast, Yan Qing said to Li Kui: “Brother, lock the door and sleep.”

He mingled with crowds going into the Temple of the East Sacred Mountain. Located on the slopes of Mount Taishan, it was one of the most lavish and magnificent temples in the world. He wandered around a while, and offered four kowtows when he emerged from a thatched pavilion.

“Where can I find Teacher Ren, the wrestler?” he asked one of the worshippers.

“He instructs two or three hundred pupils in that big inn at the foot of the Welcome Benevolence Bridge.”

Yan Qing, arriving at the bridge, found twenty or thirty wrestlers sitting on the railing. Ahead were gold-trimmed pennants and banners, embroidered canopies, and man-high backrests. He entered the inn yard. Ren Yuan was sitting in a pavilion in the center. He was indeed as huge and imposing as a temple guardian idol. Seated sideways on a bed with exposed had chest, he was every inch a tiger killer and mover of mountains as he watched his pupils perform.

One of them softly told him that this was the man who had shattered the signboard. Ren Yuan jumped up and fanned out his elbows.

“Anyone who wants to die this year can come and risk his life at my hands,” he announced.

Yan Qing lowered his head and hurriedly departed. He could hear the gales of laughter behind him. He returned to Li Kui, and they drank and dined together.

“All this sleep is suffocating me,” Black Whirlwind grumbled.

“Only one more night,” Yan Qing consoled him. “Tomorrow's the showdown.”

They chatted about various things of no interest to us.

Around the third watch the thud of drums sounded. Worshippers in the temple had commenced burning incense in celebration of the Emperor of Heaven's birthday. At the fourth watch, Yan Qing and Li Kui rose and ordered the attendant to fetch hot water so that they could wash their faces. They combed their hair smooth, removed their padded gowns, wrapped their legs in knee-length bindings, and put on silk trousers, hemp sandals, and a clean shirt each, binding this round the waist with a sash.

“We're leaving our luggage here,” they said to the attendant. “Look after it for us.”

“Nothing will be missing. Come back soon a winner!”

Staying at the inn were twenty or thirty pilgrims who had come to burn incense. “Think it over, young fellow,” they urged Yan Qing. “Why throw your life away?”

“When everyone is cheering my victory, you can collect some gifts for me,” the Prodigy replied.

The pilgrims departed for the temple.

“I might as well bring my two axes,” said Li Kui.

“You can't do that,” said Yan Qing. “If anyone recognizes you it will defeat our main purpose.”

They mingled with the crowds and found an inconspicuous place for themselves on one of the temple porches. The grounds were jammed with worshippers. Huge as it was, the Temple of the East Sacred Mountain was soon filled to overflowing. Even the ridges of the roofs were lined with spectators.

Facing Jianing Hall a shed had been erected, and in it were gold and silver trophies and prizes of silks and satins. At the door of the hall five beautiful horses were hitched, all with fine saddles and bridles.

The prefect directed that no more worshippers be allowed to enter the temple, and settled down to watch the wrestling match in honor of Buddha. An old referee, holding a bundle of bamboo rods, mounted the platform outside the hall and worshipped the god. Then he called this year's wrestlers to come forth and contend.

Before the words were out of his mouth a tide of humanity surged forward. Preceded by a dozen staff-bearing guards and four embroidered pennants, Ren Yuan approached seated on a litter. In the van and to the rear were twenty or thirty stalwarts with tattooed arms. Surrounded by a jostling crowd, the procession reached the platform. The referee invited Ren Yuan to step down, and greeted him with a few warm words of welcome.

“I have won the championship at the temple for the last two years and earned a few unmerited prizes,” said Ren Yuan. “This year I must fight stripped to the waist.”

While he was speaking a man came with a bucket of water. Ren Yuan's disciples were standing around the platform in a dense circle. Their master opened his sash, removed his head kerchief, draped his padded Sichuan silk tunic over his shoulders, and loudly and respectfully hailed the Emperor of Heaven. He drank two mouthfuls of the holy water and discarded the tunic. Admiring cheers went up from thousands of throats.

How was Ren Yuan attired? A topknot done up in red thread crowned his head. He wore a jade green silk tunic fastened at the waist over a shirt with triple rows of jade buttons and trimmed with gold ruffles. His knee-length pants were plated with bronze and had a bronze crotch protector. Iron plates

and rings encircled the calves of his legs. His wrists were firmly taped. Kicking shoes shod his feet. This, then, was the Sky-Supporting Pillar, who could lift the seas on earth and conquer the demons below.

“You've been the unrivalled champion here at the temple for the last two years, Teacher,” said the referee. “This is the third year. Is there anything you would be willing to say to the assembled worshippers?”

“From four hundred prefectures and regions, from over seven thousand counties, good people come to burn incense in honor of the Buddha. All bring gifts which I have so unworthily won as prizes during the last two years. This year, after making my devotions, I am returning to my country home, and shall not be coming to this mountain again. From where the sun rises in the east to where it sets in the west, beneath the sky where sails the sun and moon, from the land of the barbarians in the south to the remote regions of Yan in the north, is there a man who dares to contend with me for prizes?”

Before Ren Yuan's voice had died away, Yan Qing raised himself up on the shoulders of the men on either side of him and shouted: “Yes, there is!” He flew to the platform across the backs of the throng. The crowd shouted.

“What is your name, young fellow?” the referee asked. “Where is your home? Where have you come from, now?”

“I'm Zhang the pedlar, from Shandong, and I've come especially to challenge him.”

“Your end is near, young fellow, don't you realize that? Have you a sponsor?”

“I'm my own sponsor. No one has to be compensated for my life if I die!”

“Strip down and let's have a look at you.”

Yan Qing whipped off his head kerchief. His gleaming hair was tied up in a topknot. He took off his straw sandals and squatted by the side of the

platform and, unwound his leggings. Jumping up, he removed his shirt and struck a pose.

The turbulent spectators shouted their approval. They were astounded. Ren Yuan, at the sight of Yan Qing's finely muscled body, felt a thrill of fear.

On the Moon Terrace outside the hall sat the prefect, keeping order. Surrounding him, at his beck and call, were seventy or eighty pairs of black-clad police. Yan Qing came down from the platform and approached the terrace. The prefect was favorably impressed by his jade-smooth physique.

“Where are you from, young man?” he asked. “What brings you here?”

“My name is Zhang. I'm a first son, and I hail from Laizhou Prefecture in Shandong. I heard that Ren Yuan has challenged all wrestlers, and I made the trip specially to contend.”

“The horse with full equipage over there is my prize. Suppose I give them to Ren Yuan. The trophies in the shed I propose to let you and him share, half and half. I'll also raise you up and let you serve at my side.”

“Prefect, I don't care about the prizes. All I want is to dump him and give everyone a laugh, and hear the plaudits of the crowd.”

“He's as huge as a temple guardian idol. I doubt if you'll be able to get near him.”

“I'll willingly die in the attempt.” Yan Qing again mounted the combat platform and faced Ren Yuan.

The referee asked Yan Qing to sign a waiver, then pulled out a list of rules, which he read. “You understand?” he said to the Prodigy. “No dirty tricks.”

Yan Qing laughed coldly. “He's loaded with protective gear. I'm wearing only these thin silk pants. How could I do anything?”

The prefect summoned the referee. “That's a splendid young man. It's a pity,” he said softly. “Tell him you'll call it a draw, with no need to

contend.”

Returning to the platform, the referee said to Yan Qing: “I'll let you go back to your village alive, young fellow. I'll declare this contest a draw.”

“You're taking too much for granted! How do you know whether I'd win or lose?”

The area was jammed with spectators. Thousands of worshippers lined either side in dense rows like the scales on a fish. People were sitting on every inch of space atop the esplanades and on the roofs, all avidly awaiting the match.

Ren Yuan seethed with hatred. He longed to throw Yan Qing into the clouds so that he would be smashed in the fall.

“Since you're both determined to go ahead,” said the referee, “we shall proceed with this wrestling match in honor of the Emperor of Heaven. Be careful and pay attention to the rules.”

By this time the early morning mist had dissipated and the sun was beginning to rise. Holding his bundle of bamboo rods, the referee gave final instructions.

“Commence!” he shouted.

It's important to be clear in describing this wrestling-match, with its various moves. Telling it is slow, but things happened as quickly as a meteorite flashing across the sky.

At first Yan Qing only crouched on the right, while Ren Yuan stood on the left like a door god. Yan Qing didn't stir, and the space between them remained empty. Ren Yuan edged around to the right, but Yan Qing only watched the ground on three sides of his rival.

“If that's all he's going to do,” mused the champion, “I won't have to move a hand. With one kick, I'll boot him off the platform.”

Ren Yuan drew nearer. He feinted with his left foot. “None of that!” cried Yan Qing. Before Ren could close in, he slipped low past the big man's left side. Angrily, Ren whirled, but Yan weaved and dodged back past the right ribs of his opponent.

Turning his huge body again and again, Ren grew confused, and his feet stumbled. The Prodigy darted forward, grasped Ren's shoulder with his right hand, his crotch with his left, shoved his shoulder under Ren's chest, and lifted. Five times he spun with his hapless foe, who was dangling, feet in the air, to the edge of the platform.

“Down you go,” he yelled, and tossed Ren, head first, to the ground.

This gambit is called the Pirouetting Pigeon. The crowd cheered wildly. Ren Yuan's disciples, seeing their master thrown, knocked over the shed and seized the trophies. Loud quarrels and fist fights broke out among the crowd. Twenty or thirty of Ren's wrestling pupils clambered onto the platform. The prefect hadn't a chance in the world of keeping order.

No one expected that this scene would incense a mighty figure. Li Kui the Black Whirlwind, his strange eyes widening in a glare, watched angrily from the side, bristling like a tiger. He had no weapon, so he pulled up a pine sapling as easily as plucking a scallion and snapped it in two. With one segment in each hand, Li Kui commenced flailing. Some of the spectators recognized him, and called out his name. This brought policemen, who were outside, pouring into the temple.

“Don't let the Black Whirlwind of Liangshan Marsh get away!” they shouted.

When the prefect heard this, he scooted out of the rear of the hall so fast the three souls in his head and the seven spirits beneath his feet vanished With him. Some people crowded around the platform, but most of the worshippers hurried from the temple.

Ren Yuan was lying in a daze at the foot of the platform, barely breathing, when Li Kui reached him. Black Whirlwind pried up a stone slab and pounded Ren Yuan to a pulp. He and Yan Qing battled to the temple gate,

where they were met by a hail of arrows. Climbing to the roof of a temple building, they hurled tiles at their assailants.

A clamor arose at the gate, and a body of men fought their way forward. Their leader wore a wide-brimmed hat of white felt and a white silk gown, and carried a dagger at his waist. In his hands was a halberd. It was Lu Junyi, the Jade Unicorn of the Northern Capital. Behind him were Shi Jin, Mu Hong, Sagacious Lu, Wu Song, Xie Zhen and Xie Bao, with a thousand men. Forcing open the gate, they surged in to the rescue.

Yan Qing and Li Kui leaped down from the roof and joined them, and all left together. Li Kui returned to the inn for his axes, and went on a killing rampage. By the time prefectural government troops arrived at the scene, the outlaws were far gone. The soldiers knew that the men of Liangshan Marsh were difficult adversaries, and were afraid to give chase.

Lu Junyi ordered that Li Kui be collected and the return journey commenced. But during a half day's march, they saw no sign of him on the road. Lu laughed.

“That trouble-maker. Someone will have to find him and bring him back to the mountain.”

“I'll do it,” Mu Hong volunteered.

“Fine,” said Lu.

Meanwhile, Li Kui, axes in hand, proceeded to the county town of Shouzhang. The court had just adjourned for the noon recess when he walked up to the gate of government headquarters.

“The lord Black Whirlwind of Liangshan Marsh is here!” he shouted.

The staff of the county office was paralyzed with fright. Theirs was the closest town to the outlaw stronghold, and mothers had only to say “Black

Whirlwind Li Kui” to scare crying children into silence. And now, here he was, in person. A terrifying situation!

Li Kui went in and sat down on the magistrate's official chair. “A few of you had better come out and talk,” he called. “Otherwise, I'll set fire to the place.”

People in the corridor held a hasty conference. They decided they'd have to comply. “He might really do it,” they said. Two of their number were selected and sent into the hall.

They kowtowed four times and, still on their knees, spoke. “Since you've come, chieftain, you must have some instructions.”

“I don't want to disturb your county. I was passing by and thought I'd stop a while and fool around. Call your magistrate. I want to see him.”

“When he heard you'd come, he left through the back door. We don't know where he's gone.”

Li Kui didn't believe them. He wandered through the rear chambers, looking for the magistrate, and came upon the clothing wardrobe. He twisted open the lock, took out the official hat, affixed the corner attachments, and put it on. Next, he slipped into the green robe of office, tied the belt, exchanged his hemp sandals for elegant boots, took up the elmwood tablet, and walked back into the hall.

“All you officers,” he called, “come in here and see this!” They had no choice but to obey. “How does this outfit look on me?”

“Very appropriate.”

“Now, I want you to summon court for me. If you don't, I'll level this town to the ground.”

The officers were afraid of him. They called a number of functionaries, who beat three rolls on the big drums with bone and ivory sticks, then all advanced and hailed Li Kui respectfully.

Black Whirlwind laughed heartily. “Now, let two litigants argue their case.”

“No litigant would dare to appear before the chieftain.”

“Then a couple of you can act the parts. I won't hurt you. It's just for fun.”

The functionaries conferred, and picked two jail keepers to play the roles. Local people crowded the gate of the county office to watch. The two litigants knelt at the front of the hall.

“Pity me, magistrate,” said the plaintiff. “That man struck me.”

“He cursed me, first,” retorted the defendant. “That's why I hit him.”

“Who is the one who was hit?” Li Kui queried.

“I, sir,” said the plaintiff.

“And who is the one who hit him?”

“He swore at me,” said the defendant, “so I clouted him.”

“The man who did the hitting is a good fellow,” said Li Kui. “Let him go. The other is a spiritless lout. Why did he allow himself to be struck? Put a rack around his neck and parade him before the populace in the street outside the office.”

Li Kui rose, fastened the green official gown, tucked the elmwood tablet in his belt, grasped his big axes, and went out to supervise the affixing of the rack around the neck of the plaintiff. Only after the man was put on exhibition at the county office gate, did Black Whirlwind stride on. He was still wearing the magistrate's splendid clothes and boots. The people who had been watching at the gate couldn't restrain their mirth.

He wandered around the town for a while, and then he heard pupils chanting their lessons. He raised the door curtain of the schoolroom and went in. The terrified teacher leaped out of the window and fled. Pupils wept, screamed, ran, or hid. Chuckling, Li Kui departed. Just outside the door he ran into Mu Hong.

“Everyone has been worried stiff about you, and here you are playing the fool! Come back to the mountain at once!”

Mu Hong dragged Li Kui off without any ceremony. Black Whirlwind was compelled to leave Shouzhang County and return to Liangshan Marsh. Crossing the Shore of Golden Sands, the two arrived at the fortress. Everyone laughed at the sight of Li Kui's attire. Song Jiang was holding a celebration for Yan Qing in Loyalty Hall when Black Whirlwind, enveloped in a green magistrate's robe, discarded his axes, swaggered in, and kowtowed before him, elmwood tablet in hand. As he began his prostrations, he trod on the gown, ripping it, and fell sprawling. The assembled chieftains roared with laughter.

“You've got a nerve, sneaking down the mountain without my permission,” cried Song Jiang. “For that, you deserve to die! Every place you go, you make trouble. I'm saying this in front of all our brothers—I won't forgive you the next time!”

Li Kui sang out a respectful acknowledgment, and withdrew.

The succeeding period on Mount Liangshan was uneventful. The men practiced daily with their weapons, the infantry and cavalry maneuvered, the naval forces polished their skills. In each of the forts they busily manufactured more war machines, clothing, armor, blades, bows and arrows, banners and pennants. Of that we'll say no more.

Meanwhile, Tai'an Prefecture had sent a report to the imperial court in the Eastern Capital. The Council for Reports to the Throne had been receiving reports from the various prefectures and counties, and they all were complaints about the depredations of Song Jiang and his forces. The minister decided to present them together.

The day the imperial audiences were to be held, at the sound of the Jingyang Bell all the high officials gathered in the Hall of the Water Clock to await the arrival of the emperor at the morning court. It was a month since the Taoist Sovereign had last conducted such a session.

At three raps of the rod in the imperial ante-chamber, the civil and military officials formed in two bodies at the foot of the golden stairs. The holy ruler appeared. All kowtowed, and the chief of ceremonies called: “If anyone has a petition, let him come forward. If there are none, this court will adjourn.”

The Minister of the Council for Reports to the Throne advanced and said: “Our council has received a great many reports from the various prefectures and counties complaining about Song Jiang and his robber chieftains. These brigands openly attack towns and cities, pillage treasuries and granaries, kill soldiers and civilians. They are insatiable, but wherever they go no one seems able to defeat them. If they are not destroyed soon, they will cause tremendous damage. We pray that Your Majesty take appropriate measures.”

“Last year at the first Lunar Festival, they raided this capital,” said the emperor. “This year they're causing disturbances everywhere, not just in prefectures and shires near their lair. I ordered the Council of Military Affairs to send troops against them, but have not yet received any reports.”

Cui Qing, the Inspector General, stepped forward and said: “We hear that in Liangshan Marsh they have a banner which reads 'Act in Heaven's Behalf.' It tends to delude the common people. Because the people sympathize with them, it is not feasible to send troops among them. Moreover, Tartar Liao armies are attacking our borders, and our outposts are not able to cope with them all. It would be very inconvenient for us to divert soldiers at this time to a punitive expedition against the bandits. In my humble opinion, those deperadoes in the mountains, lawbreakers all, have gone into hiding and are committing wicked acts because they have no other way out. If a royal amnesty could be issued, and a high minister, bearing a dispensation of imperial wine and food, could go to Liangshan Marsh and speak kind words and offer the amnesty on condition that they fight against the Liao, both the public and private interests would be served. We pray that Your Majesty take appropriate measures.”

“There is reason in what you say,” replied the emperor. “It has my approval.”

He designated Marshal Chen Zongshan as emissary, and directed him to proceed to Mount Liangshan with the symbolic imperial wine and an amnesty for all. Court was adjourned, and Marshal Chen took the royal decree and returned home to prepare for the journey.

And because Marshal Chen went with the amnesty, thousands of weapon blades and armored cavalry covered the mountain, and vast armadas of fighting ships crowded the waterways. Their thunderous clashes flushed out the demons and angered the King of Hell. Truly, fragrant imperial wine turned to stomach-burning gall, a royal pardon led to a declaration of war.

How did Marshal Chen deliver the amnesty to Song Jiang? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 75
The Devil Incarnate Upsets the Boat and Steals the Imperial Wine
The Black Whirlwind Rips Up the Pardon and Curses Emperor Hui Zong

As Marshal Chen was preparing for his journey, several people came and said: “Your mission will serve the government and remove a burden from the populace. Both the army and the people will benefit. The men of Liangshan Marsh place loyalty to the throne above all. They await only the emperor's amnesty. Speak sweet words, Marshal, and reassure them. Your clean name will be renowned for ten thousand generations.”

Just then the majordomo of the premier's chancellery arrived. “The premier would like to speak to you, Marshal,” he said.

Chen mounted his sedan-chair and went directly to the chancellery on New Song Gate Avenue. The majordomo led him to the study in the inner sanctum, where the premier received him. Chen sat down politely to one side. They had some tea, then Premier Cai spoke.

“I hear the emperor is sending you to Mount Liangshan with an amnesty. That's why I've asked you for a talk. You mustn't relax our imperial discipline when you get there, or violate our national laws. Remember what the *Analects of Confucius* say: 'When on a mission, wherever you go, abuse not the sovereign's command, and be a worthy emissary.'”

“This I know. Please give me your instructions, Premier.”

“I've directed my majordomo to accompany you. He's well acquainted with the law. If you run into any snags, he'll be able to remind you.”

“I'm deeply grateful for your consideration,” said Chen. He took his leave of the premier, left the chancellery with the majordomo, got into his sedan-chair, and returned home.

He had just settled down to rest, when his gate-keeper entered and announced: “Marshal Gao is dismounting at the gate.” Chen hastened out to welcome him, and invited him to be seated in the hall. After an exchange of pleasantries, Gao came to the point.

“If I had been present when the imperial court was considering an amnesty for Song Jiang, I would have opposed it. Those brigands have insulted the court time and again, and their crimes reach the sky! Pardoning them and letting them come into the capital is sure to provoke disaster. I wanted to submit my own petition, but the royal decree had already been announced. Well, we'll see what happens. If those bandits still have no conscience and stall on the amnesty, return to the capital quickly, Marshal. I'll petition the emperor to muster a large army, which I'll lead personally, and wipe them out, root and branch! That's my fondest wish. I have a captain under my command who's a clever and competent speaker. Give him one question, and he'll answer you ten. He can go with you and lend you a hand.”

“I'm grateful for Your Excellency's concern.”

Marshal Gao rose, and Chen escorted him to the gate of the residency. There, Gao climbed on his horse and departed.

The next day Premier Cai's Majordomo Zhang and Marshal Gao's Captain Li arrived at Chen's headquarters. Marshal Chen's horses were already saddled and bridled and his soldiers mustered. Ten generals placed ten bottles of imperial wine into hampers decorated with dragons and phoenixes, and these were carried by bearers on shoulder-poles and preceded by imperial yellow banners.

Marshal Chen mounted. Accompanied by a trusted entourage of five or six, plus Zhang and Li, also on horseback, and with the emperor's decree carried in the lead, he led the procession through the New Song Gate. The officials who were seeing them off returned to the city.

The party wound its way to Jizhou. Prefect Zhang Shuye met them and invited them into the prefecture, where a feast had been laid. He inquired about the amnesty, and Marshal Chen told him the story.

“In my humble opinion, it's the best solution,” said the prefect. “There's just one thing: you must speak to them pleasantly and reassure them with kind words. Nothing else matters so long as you accomplish the main objective. Your good name will be famed to all posterity. Several of those outlaws are very hotheaded. If you say one word that triggers them off, the whole deal may be spoiled.”

“Nothing can go wrong with us two along,” said Majordomo Zhang and Captain Li. “You talk only of caution and affability, Prefect. What about our imperial discipline? Those worthless fellows must be constantly chastened. If you let them get too cocky they'll set a bad example to others.”

“Who are these two?” the prefect queried.

“This is Premier Cai's majordomo, and this is a captain under Marshal Gao.”

“It would be better if they didn't go.”

“They're trusted confidants. If I don't take them, the premier and the marshal will get suspicious.”

“I'm only trying to help. I'm afraid your journey will be futile.”

“With us two along,” the majordomo interjected, “though there be ten thousand fathoms of water, not a drop will escape!”

The prefect was afraid to say any more. After feasting his guests, he escorted them to the hostel for officials, to rest.

The next day the prefecture sent a man to inform Mount Liangshan of the mission. Song Jiang had been conferring daily with his chieftains in Loyalty Hall on the military situation. Spies had already reported to him that an amnesty was being offered and, although he had not yet seen any proof of this, he was overjoyed.

Now, the messenger arrived from Jizhou and said: “Marshal Chen, an emissary from the royal court, has reached our prefecture. He brings ten

bottles of imperial wine and a vermilion decree of amnesty. Prepare to welcome him.”

Song Jiang was delighted. He rewarded the messenger with wine and clothing material and ten ounces of silver, and sent him back.

“We're going to be pardoned and become government officials,” he said to the chieftain. “Our hardships have not been in vain. At last we will attain our just rewards.”

“To my mind the amnesty won't go through,” said Wu Yong. “Even if it does, they consider us with contempt. Better wait till the scoundrels come at us with a big army and we give them a good drubbing. We'll slaughter their men and down their horses till we terrify them even in their dreams. That's the time to accept an amnesty. Then we can do it with dignity.'

“You shouldn't talk like that,” said Song Jiang. “It goes against our principle of 'loyalty.'”

“High court officials coming here,” mused Lin Chong. “They're up to something, and it's not necessarily good.”

“There's sure to be some threat in the decree, to frighten us,” said Guan Sheng.

“These fellows must be Marshal Gao's men.” said Xu Ning.

“Stop being so sceptical, all of you,” Song Jiang ordered. “Get ready to welcome them.”

He instructed Song Qing and Cao Zheng to prepare a feast, and Chai Jin to supervise all arrangements, “in proper style.” He directed that a dwelling be provided for Marshal Chen, with silk and satin furnishings, and colored decorations hung throughout. He sent Pei Xuan, Xiao Rang, Lu Fang and Guo Sheng down the mountain and twenty *li* along the road to welcome the arrivals. The chieftains of the naval forces were to moor large boats by the shore to ferry them across.

“Don't make a move without my orders,” Wu Yong warned the chieftains.

Xiao Rang and his three companions, with another five or six carrying wine and tidbits, all completely unarmed, advanced twenty *li* as a welcoming party.

During that stage of Marshal Chen's journey, Majordomo Zhang and Captain Li did not ride, but walked ahead of the horses. Two or three hundred government troops followed. These included a dozen military officers from Jizhou, riding in ranks to the fore. Next came the imperial wine bearers, and then the mounted purveyor of the Vermilion decree, which was in a casket strapped to his back. Fifty or sixty jail-keepers from the prefecture tagged along, hoping to pick up a little graft from the outlaws.

The procession was greeted by the welcoming party, who prostrated themselves, then knelt by the roadside.

“Your Song Jiang thinks pretty highly of himself,” said Majordomo Zhang. “The emperor has sent an amnesty. Why isn't he here to receive it? This is an insult! You're all criminals who deserve to die. An imperial amnesty would be wasted on you. Marshal, let's go back.”

The four brigands again prostrated themselves. “Our stronghold has not seen the amnesty yet,” they explained. “We don't know if it is true or not. Song Jiang and all the chieftains are waiting to welcome you on the Shore of Golden Sands. Pray don't be angry, Marshal. The main thing is to carry this matter through for the sake of our country. Please forgive us.”

“Even if we don't carry it through, I see no danger of you robbers flying up to Heaven,” sneered Captain Li.

“What kind of talks is that,” Lu Fang and Guo Sheng muttered. “They're only trifling with us!”

Xiao Rang and Pei Xuan continued to plead with the emissaries. The wine and tidbits they offered were refused. But the government expedition went with them to the river, where three warships were waiting. On one the

horses were loaded; on the second, Pei Xuan and his party; on the third, the marshal and his entourage. The amnesty and the imperial wine were placed in the bow of this last craft. It was commanded by the Devil Incarnate Ruan the Seventh.

Seated on the prow of his vessel, Ruan gave directions to his twenty-some-odd naval oarsmen, each armed with a dagger at his waist. When Marshal Chen first came on board he was very lofty and aloof as he took a seat in the center. Ruan called to his sailors to row, and the men on both sides sang as they bent to their oars.

“Donkeys!” swore Captain Li. “His Excellency is present. Absolutely no sense of discretion!”

The sailors ignored him, and went on singing. Li threatened them with a rattan cane, but they stared at him fearlessly.

“If we feel like singing, what's it to you!” several of them said. “Wretched rebellious bandits, how dare you talk back to me!” Li fumed. He flailed wildly with his cane. Sailors on both sides promptly leaped into the water.

“You beat my oarsmen and force them overboard,” Ruan the Seventh called from the bow. “How is this boat going to move?”

Two swift craft were seen to approach from upstream. Ruan had previously partially flooded the hold of his boat. Now, as the two vessels closed in behind him, he pulled out the plug and yelled: “We're leaking!”

Water poured into the hold. As Ruan cried for help, it was already over a foot deep. The two craft pulled alongside, and Marshal Chen was hastily assisted over to one of them. All efforts were concentrated on getting away. No one had time to think about the imperial wine or the emperor's amnesty. The two light boats rowed on swiftly ahead.

Ruan ordered his men to bail out the hold and mop it dry. “Bring me a bottle of that imperial wine,” he called. “I want to see what it tastes like.”

A sailor fetched a bottle, opened the sealed cap, and handed it to Ruan. Its fragrance tickled his nose.

“It may be poisoned,” he said, “but I'll take the risk and try it!” He put the bottle to his lips and kept swallowing till he drained it dry.

“A pleasant bouquet,” he said. “But one bottle is hardly enough. Bring me another!” He drank that one, too. Now that his throat was moistened, he finished off two more. Suddenly, he realized that he had created a problem.

“What am I going to do?” he said.

“There's a cask of liquor in the bow,” one of the men suggested.

“Fetch me a bailing scoop and I'll give you fellows a share,” said Ruan.

What he did was to distribute the remaining six bottles of imperial wine among the sailors, and when they had consumed them, filled the ten empty bottles with cheap rustic liquor from the cask. Resealing the caps, he put the bottles back in the royal hampers decorated with dragons and phoenixes. Then the men plied their oars mightily and sent their craft skimming along.

They reached the Shore of Golden Sands just as the others were disembarking. Song Jiang was waiting to welcome the royal emissary with incense and flowers and colored lanterns. Gongs crashed, drums pounded, and the fortress band made joyful music. The imperial wine was placed on a table which was carried by four men. The emperor's amnesty was similarly transported on another table. As Marshal Chen stepped ashore, Song Jiang kowtowed before him.

“I'm a former petty functionary whose face is marked with the criminal's tattoo, and my wicked deeds obscure the sky. Though Your Excellency has demeaned himself to come here, I cannot entertain you properly. I humbly crave your pardon.”

“The marshal is a high official of the imperial court,” said Captain Li. “He brings you men an amnesty. This is no small affair. How could you dispatch

a leaky boat commanded by an ignorant rustic? You nearly endangered His Excellency's life!”

“We have plenty of good boats. We'd never dare send a leaky craft for His Excellency.”

“Are you trying to deny it?” demanded Majordomo Zhang. “The hem of the marshal's robe is soaking wet!”

Song Jiang's five Tiger Cavalry chieftains pressed close behind to left and right, his eight Cavalry Picket commanders ranged themselves fore and aft. The insolence of Zhang and Li enraged them, and they would gladly have slain them were it not for the restraining presence of Song Jiang.

Only after Song Jiang's repeated entreaties did Marshal Chen get into the sedan-chair provided. Horses were brought for Majordomo Zhang and Captain Li. The two continued to behave with disgusting arrogance. Song Jiang persuaded them to mount and the procession, with much shrilling of pipes and beating of drums, proceeded upward through the three passes. Song Jiang and over a hundred chieftains followed.

All dismounted on reaching Loyalty Hall, and the marshal was invited in. The imperial wine and the amnesty were placed in the center at the upper end of the building. The marshal, the majordomo and the captain stood on the left side. Xiao Rang and Pei Xuan stood on the right. Song Jiang called the roll of chieftains. One hundred and seven men—only Li Kui was missing.

It was the fourth lunar month, and they were wearing light battle robes of lined silk as they knelt in the hall to hear the reading of the amnesty. Marshal Chen took the document from its casket and handed it to Xiao Rang. Pei Xuan officiated. At his call, the chieftains kowtowed. Xiao Rang unrolled the decree and read it out in a loud voice:

Edict: The country is governed by both civil and military means. The earliest emperors used both ceremony and punitive wars to preserve our

territory. Matters may go smoothly or with difficulty. People may be clever or stupid. As I carry on the rule of my ancestors over this great empire, on which the sun and the moon always shine brilliantly, stretching so vast under the heavens, there is none who does not give me homage.

Recently, Song Jiang and his gang have been roistering over the wooded hills and pillaging the shires. Originally, I was going to suppress them with soldiers, but I feared this would cause harm to the people. I have therefore sent Marshal Chen forward with my amnesty. On receipt of it the bandits must turn over all their money, grain, weapons, horses and boats to my officials, destroy their lair, and be led into the capital. I will then pardon their crimes. If they lack conscience and oppose this decree I shall dispatch troops and wipe them out, young and old. Let this amnesty be proclaimed so that all may know.

In the early summer, fourth month of the third year of the reign of Xuan Ho.

Amnesty hereby proclaimed.

Xiao Rang finished reading. Anger darkened the countenance of Song Jiang and his men. Suddenly, Li Kui the Black Whirlwind leaped down from an overhead beam. He snatched the amnesty from Xiao Rang's hands and tore it to shreds. Then he grabbed Marshal Chen and commenced pummeling him with his fist.

Song Jiang and Lu Junyi threw their arms around Li Kui, and finally managed to separate him from the marshal.

“Who is this varlet,” shouted Captain Li. “How dare he behave like this!”

Black Whirlwind was just looking for someone to hit, and he turned his attentions to Li. Punching him, he demanded: “Whose words are those, written in that amnesty?”

“It's an imperial decree from the emperor,” said Majordomo Zhang.

“Your emperor doesn't understand anything about us bold fellows here! Pardoning us—what crust! Your emperor's name is Song. So's my Big Brother's. Your Song is an emperor. Why shouldn't my Song be an emperor too! Don't you come stirring up this Black Whirlwind, or I'll kill every one of you amnesty-writing officials!”

The others pulled him away from the emissaries and hustled him out of the hall.

“Don't take it to heart, Marshal,” Song Jiang urged. “Not the slightest rudeness will be allowed. Bring the imperial wine and let everyone savor the emperor's kindness.”

A golden goblet inlaid with jade was produced. Pei Xuan first poured wine from an imperial bottle into a silver testing bowl. It was cheap rustic liquor. The contents of the other nine bottles were similarly examined. All were of the same crude brew.

Shocked, most of the chieftains stalked out of the hall. Sagacious Lu brandished his iron staff and swore.

“Mother-rapers! This is going too far! Trying to give us watered liquor for imperial wine!”

Red-Haired Demon Liu Tang rushed forward with his halberd. Advancing together came Pilgrim Wu Song with his swords, plus Mu Hong the Unrestrained and Nine Dragons Shi Jin. The six commanders of the naval forces walked out, cursing.

Plainly, the situation was tense. Song Jiang blocked off his men with his body and ordered a sedan-chair and horses for the marshal and his escorts. They were to be escorted down the mountain immediately, and no one was to harm them. Most of the chieftains were in a towering rage. Song Jiang and Lu Junyi were compelled to mount their own steeds and see the marshal through the three passes personally. Kowtowing, Song Jiang begged forgiveness.

“It's not that we don't wish to surrender,” he said. “The fact is that the framers of the amnesty don't realize how complicated our situation is here. If only the decree contained a few comforting words, we would gladly die ten thousand deaths to serve our country! Please explain that, Marshal, when you report to the throne.”

The emissaries were hastily ferried across. Farting and pissing in terror, they fled back to Jizhou.

Song Jiang returned to Loyalty Hall and summoned the chieftains to a feast. “Although the court decree wasn't very intelligent, you shouldn't have behaved so impetuously,” he said.

“Don't delude yourself, brother,” said Wu Yong. “There will be an amnesty some day. But why reproach the brothers for getting angry? The court's attitude was too contemptuous. Forget about all that for now. Order full equipment for the cavalry, weapons for the infantry, and a refurbishment of our naval vessels. Sooner or later the government is going to send a big punitive army against us. We've got to slaughter their soldiers and down their horses in one or two battles, so that they're bereft of their armor and fear us in their dreams. That will be the time to talk about amnesty again.”

“Absolutely right,” said the chieftains. The feasting ended, and they retired to their respective quarters.

Meanwhile, Marshal Chen reached Jizhou. He told Zhang Shuye what had transpired in the mountain stronghold.

“Perhaps you said something you shouldn't?” suggested the prefect.

“I didn't dare open my mouth!”

“In that case, it was just a waste of effort. In fact, it made matters worse. Hurry back and report to the throne, Marshal. You mustn't delay.”

Marshal Chen, Majordomo Zhang, Captain Li and the entourage returned to the Eastern Capital that night. Chen related to the prime minister in detail how the bandits of Liangshan Marsh had ripped up the decree. Cai was furious.

“How dare those petty robbers be so rude! We'll teach them to insult the great Song Dynasty!”

Chen wept. “If I hadn't been protected by your emanations, Premier, my shattered bones would be lying in the bandit fortress right now! Fortunately, I escaped with my life and was able to see your beneficent countenance again!”

The premier summoned the Chancellor of Military Affairs Tong Guan, and Marshal Gao and Marshal Yang to a military conference. They soon reported to the White Tiger Inner Sanctum. When they were seated, Cai sent for the majordomo and the captain, who told how the imperial decree was torn to shreds in the Mount Liangshan stronghold.

“Why should such scoundrels be amnestied!” cried Marshal Yang. “Which official recommended such a thing?”

“If I had been present, I surely would have opposed it,” said Gao. “I never would have agreed!”

“Thieving rats and marauding dogs, contemptible rabble,” fumed Tong. “I have no talent, but just let me lead an expedition personally, set a time limit, and I'll wipe them off the earth!”

“We'll petition the throne tomorrow,” said the others. The meeting disbanded.

At the morning court the next day, high officials waited on the imperial stairs. Three times the rods rapped in the imperial hall, and officials divided into civil and military sections. Three times they called: “Long live the

emperor," and made their obeisances. Premier Cai stepped forward and reported the outcome of the amnesty mission. The emperor was very angry.

"Who was it who proposed that I issue an amnesty?" he demanded.

"The Inspector General Cui Qing," someone replied.

The emperor ordered Cui to report to the Ministry of Justice and ask for punishment. He turned to the premier. "Those bandits have wreaking havoc for a long time. Who can we send to annihilate them?"

"We cannot succeed without a large force. In my humble estimation, the Chancellor of Military Affairs should lead the expedition personally. He can attain victory within an allotted time."

The emperor summoned Tong Guan and asked: "Are you willing to lead troops and seize the brigands of Liangshan Marsh?"

Kneeling, Tong replied: "As the ancients put it: 'The filial son must do his utmost, the loyal minister must stake his life.' I am ready to give my all to eradicate this canker in our hearts."

Marshal Gao Qiu and Marshal Yang Jian pledged their support. The emperor then issued a decree directing that gold seals and military tallies be issued to Tong Guan, that he be raised to the rank of Grand General, and that troops be drawn from various sources and placed under his command for use against the bandits of Mount Liangshan. A date was fixed for him to set forth.

And because Tong Guan marched with his army, thousands of cavalry filled the mountains and valleys, and innumerable fighting ships rode the green waters. Truly, only three thousand horsemen, bold as tigers, rolled up countless soldiers, courageous as leopards.

What lay in store for Tong Guan's big army? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 76
Wu Yong Lays Out Four-Dipper Positions and Five-Pennant Arches
Song Jiang Sets Troops in Nine Segments Within an Octagon

Tong Guan proceeded to the Council of Military Affairs to muster troops and issue tallies. He ordered each of the eight military districts under the jurisdiction of the Eastern Capital to dispatch ten thousand men, headed by the district commander. The capital guards were to provide twenty thousand soldiers to protect the main body. Tong turned the running of the Council of Military Affairs over to his deputy. From the imperial garrison he selected two good generals to lead the forces on his left and right flanks.

Within ten days preparations were completed. Marshal Gao designated an official who would be responsible for quartermaster supply. Tong Guan, who maintained overall command, directed the officers of his three armies to get ready. He had weapons issued from the armory, and selected an auspicious day for departure. Marshals Gao and Yang gave him a farewell banquet. The imperial court directed the Council of Administration to dispense money among the soldiers.

Tong Guan ordered his commanders to set forth with the troops the following day. He bid farewell to the emperor, vaulted into the saddle, and left the city. Five *li* beyond the gate he found Marshals Gao and Yang waiting for him with a large body of officials. Tong dismounted, and Gao handed him a ceremonial cup of wine.

“Military Affairs Chancellor,” said Marshal Gao, “you will undoubtedly distinguish yourself for the throne and return victorious. But you mustn't underestimate the bandits who conceal themselves in the marsh. First, store up a good supply of grain and fodder and build strong stockades, then you can lure them down from the mountain. Send suitable persons to scout out what they are up to before advancing. Capture every one of them alive. Don't let the imperial court down. I hope you will consider what I say.”

“The words from your vast learning will remain engraved on my heart. I will not forget.”

The two men drank. Marshal Yang came forward with ceremonial flagon and addressed Tong.

“The chancellor has read books on military lore and is deeply versed in strategy. Ordinarily, he would catch the bandits as easily as turning over his hand. Unfortunately, they operate in a marsh, and have the terrain in their favor. I trust, Chancellor, that you have a good plan.”

“I will strike when the opportunity presents. I have my own methods,” said Tong.

The two officials drank to him, and said: “Here, outside the capital's gate, we pledge you this: We shall look forward eagerly to news of your victory.” They bid one another farewell and got on their horses.

Gao, Yang, and the other dignitaries returned to the city. The numerous minor officials who were also seeing Tong Guan off gradually dwindled away.

The three armies marched, every man bristling with martial spirit. They kept well-formed ranks. Discipline was strict. Leading the expedition was a vanguard of four divisions, commanded by a general. The rear unit was also comprised of four divisions, under another general. Covering the left and right of the eight divisions were flanking units headed by more generals. In addition to the main body commanded by Tong Guan directly, the twenty thousand infantry and cavalry guarding the flanks were all crack members of the imperial garrison. Holding his baton, Chancellor Tong supervised the march. The weapons advanced like a turbulent river, men and horses seemed to sail with the wind.

After fifty *li,* they made camp. The next day they resumed the march along the winding road. In less than two days they reached the boundaries of Jizhou Prefecture. Zhang Shuye, the prefect, emerged from the city to greet them. The armies camped outside the walls.

Tong Guan, with a troop of light cavalry, rode in and dismounted before prefectural headquarters. Zhang invited him into the main hall. The prefect

kowtowed and was raised to his feet. He stood courteously before the Chancellor of Military Affairs.

“Those swamp bandits kill good citizens and rob travelling merchants. They're committed many a wicked crime,” said Tong Guan. “Time and again we've tried to catch them, but we've never done so, and they've been allowed to spread. I come at the head of a hundred commanders and a hundred thousand troops. I shall eradicate the mountain stronghold, capture the brigands, and restore peace to the populace.”

“The bandits operate in the marsh, Chancellor,” said Zhang. “Although they're only mountain outlaws, there are some intelligent and courageous men among them. Don't let yourself be governed by anger. Devise careful plans, and you will succeed.”

“It's timid, weak officials like you, leery of weapons and scared of death, who harm the nation and allow such brigandage to exist!” Tong shouted in a rage. “I'm here, now! You've nothing to fear!”

Zhang dared say no more. He lavishly wined and dined his guest, and Tong Guan left the city. The following day, at the head of his huge force, Chancellor Tong neared Liangshan Marsh.

Song Jiang had been informed by his spies of the coming attack some days before. With Wu Yong he worked out an airtight strategy, and they awaited the arrival of the big army. They instructed the outlaw chieftains to obey orders and allow no slip-ups.

Tong Guan had designated Duan Pengju, district commander of Suizhou Prefecture, as leader of the vanguard, with Chen Zhu, district commander of Zhengzhou, as his deputy. District Commander Wu Bingyi of Chenzhou was named leader of the combined rear; his deputy was Li Ming, district commander of Xuzhou. Han Tianlin, district commander of Tangzhou, and Wang Yi, district commander of Dengzhou, were put in charge of the left patrol; district commander Ma Wanli of Ruzhou and Zhou Xin, district commander of Songzhou, led the right patrol. Generals Feng Mei and Bi Sheng commanded the flanks of the central army. Tong Guan, the

commander-in-chief, in full armor, exercised personal control over all operations.

Three times the battle drums thundered, and the army resumed its march. Before it had gone ten *li*, an enemy patrol was seen approaching in a rising cloud of dust. Thirty or so outlaw riders, the bells on their horses jingling, drew near. Black kerchiefs bound their heads, and they wore green battle robes. Their steeds were decked in red tassels and dozens of copper bells. Plumes protruding from the animals' hindquarters. The men carried long thin lances banded with silver, and light bows and arrows.

The standard of the leader bore the inscription: *Patrol Commander Zhang Qin the Featherless Arrow.* To his left was Gong Wang, to his right Ding Desun. About a hundred paces from Tong Guan's advance unit, the patrol reined in and turned back. The two commanders of the vanguard were unable to act, since they had no orders. They reported to the central command. Tong Guan rode forward personally. Before he had finished his inspection, Zhang Qin again advanced. Tong Guan was about to send men after him when one of his aides issued a warning.

“He has stones in an embroidered bag behind his saddle. When he throws, he never misses. Better let him alone.”

Featherless Arrow rode out three times. Tong Guan made no move. Zhang Qin and his patrol went away.

Again the government army marched. Before it had gone five *li* gongs sounded behind the hills and around the bend came five hundred outlaw infantry. They were led by Black Whirlwind Li Kui, Fan Rui the Demon King Who Roils the World, Xiang Chong the Eight-Armed Nezha, and Li Gun the Flying Divinity. At the foot of the slope the brigands spread out in a straight line, round shields neatly in place.

Tong Guan at the head of his army waved his fly-whisk baton, and his soldiers surged rapidly forward. Li Kui and Fan Rui divided their infantry unit into two, both of which withdrew around the bend, all carrying their shields reversed. The government troops pursued them through a gap in the hills.

Reaching the other side they found a broad level plain, and there they began setting up their battle positions. In the distance Li Kui and Fan Rui scaled a height and disappeared into a forest.

Tong Guan's men erected a tall wooden command platform. Two military experts climbed to the top. In response to Tong's orders they directed soldiers to left and right, high and low, moving them into four positions shaped like hollow scoops.

No sooner was this done than cannon boomed on the rear of the mountain, and out flew a body of brigand cavalry. The government vanguard, already in position, waited to meet the foe. Ordering an aide to hold his horse, Tong Guan climbed to the top of the command platform. He saw a column of horsemen surging from the east side of the mountain. The foremost troop carried red flags, the second had striped ones, the third bore blue flags, the fourth also carried flags that were striped.

Another cavalry unit was sweeping around the west side of the mountain. The first troop carried striped flags; the second, white; the third, also striped; and the fourth, black. Behind each of the flag bearers streamed massed pennants of yellow.

Hurriedly the government generals repaired to the center of the army and established defensive formations. They could see the raiders clearly now, advancing from the south. Bearing flags of flaming red the lead riders were dressed in red gowns and armor; their roan-colored horses were festooned with red tassels. The red standard in the lead was embroidered above in gold thread with the six-starred Southern Dipper, and below in cinnabar with the emblem of a bird. On it was written: *Vanguard General Qin Ming the Thunderbolt,* and Qin suddenly emerged from the sea of red banners. On his left was deputy commander Shan Tinggui the Water General, on his right deputy commander Wei Dingguo the Fire General. Twirling their weapons astride their roan steeds they halted at the edge of the battlefield.

To their east were riders bearing blue flags. They wore blue gowns and armor, and blue tassels decorated their blue-grey horses. The blue standard in the lead was embroidered above in gold thread with the four-starred Eastern Dipper, and below in blue thread with a dragon. On it was written

The Big Halberd Guan Sheng, General of the Left Army, and from the sea of blue banners Guan suddenly emerged. Beside him were his deputy commanders. On his left was Ugly Son-in-Law Xuan Zan, on his right Hao Siwen the Wild Dog. The three, weapons in hand, astride their blue-grey mounts, halted at the edge of the battlefield.

To the west appeared a troop of horsemen bearing white banners and wearing white gowns and armor, and riding white horses with white tassels, The white standard in the lead was embroidered above in gold thread with the five-starred Western Dipper, and below with a white tiger. On it was written *Panther Head Lin Chong, General of the Right Army,* and from the massed white banners Lin surged forth, flanked by his deputy commanders. On his left was Huang Xin Suppressor of the Three Mountains, on his right Sun Li the Sickly General. Twirling their weapons astride their white steeds they reined in at the battlefield.

Behind came cavalry with black banners. The gowns and armor of the men were black, as were the horses and their tassels. On the black standard in the lead the seven-starred North Dipper was embroidered above in gold thread, with the symbol for the Seven Northern Constellations below. It bore the words: *Two Rods Huyan Zhuo, General of the Combined Rear,* and Huyan suddenly emerged from amid the sea of black banners. With him were his deputy commanders. Ever-Victorious General Han Tao was on his left, the Eyes of Heaven General Peng Qi was on his right. Weapons in hand they halted their black steeds at the edge of the field of battle.

From the shadows of an arch of pennants to the southeast a troop rode forth carrying blue banners and wearing red armor. Embroidered on the standard in the lead in gold thread was the wind symbol above and a flying dragon below. Written on it were the words: *General Two Spears Dong Ping,* and Dong emerged with his deputy commanders from amid the banners. On his left was Ou Peng Golden Wings Brushing the Clouds, on his right Fiery-Eyed Lion Deng Fei. They reined in at the battlefield, weapons in hand.

A troop with red banners and white armor emerged from the shadows of an arch of pennants to the southwest. Embroidered on the lead standard in gold thread was the earth-symbol, and below that a winged bear. It bore the words: *Urgent Vanguard Suo Chao, General of the Cavalry,* and Suo rode

forth from the banners, accompanied by his deputy commanders. On his left was Elegant Tiger Yan Shun, on his right Ma Lin the Elfin Flutist. Weapons in hand, the three halted their chargers at the battlefield.

Through an arch of pennants to the northeast came a body of horsemen with black banners and blue armor. On the lead standard embroidered in gold thread was the symbol for mountain, and below that a flying panther. On it was inscribed: *Cavalry General Nine Dragons Shi Jin*, and Shi emerged from the sea of banners with his deputy commanders. On his left was Gorge-Leaping Tiger Chen Da, on his right White-Spotted Snake Yang Chun. Weapons in hand, they halted at the battlefield astride their chargers.

From the northwest, through an arch of pennants came a cavalry unit with white banners and black armor. The symbol for Heaven was embroidered in gold thread on the upper half of the lead standard; below it was a flying tiger. *Cavalry General Yang Zhi the Blue-Faced Beast* read the standard, and Yang emerged from amid the banners, accompanied by his deputies. Yang Lin the Elegant Panther was on his left. On his right was Zhou Tong the Little King. The three reined in their chargers at the edge of the field of battle, holding their weapons.

The outlaw forces were thus laid out in a huge iron octagon, cavalry grouped with cavalry, infantry with infantry, all bristling with weapons, banners in neat rows—a formidable array! In the center were flags of apricot yellow, interspersed with sixty-four long banners, each bearing the octagon diagram.

At the four points of the compass the octagon was broken by four arches. Cavalry massed at the southern end, and in the shadows of the arch of pennants were two commanders, in ordinary dress astride yellow-brown horses. The first was Beautiful Beard Zhu Tong, the second was Lei Heng the Winged Tiger. All the riders in the troop carried yellow banners, wore yellow robes and yellow bronze armor, and sat yellow-brown steeds decked with yellow tassels.

The interior position was also open at four corners. Shi En the Golden-Eyed Tiger Cub commanded the eastern opening, the western entry was under

Zheng Tianshou the Fair-Faced Gentleman, Song Wan the Guardian of the Clouds held the southern, and Xue Yong the Sick Tiger the northern.

In the center of the yellow pennants was an apricot-yellow banner reading: *Act in Heaven's Behalf.* From the pole to which this was attached ran four woolen cords, and these were grasped by four tall stalwarts to hold the pole firm. Also guarding the banner was a man on horseback, Yu Baosi the Spirit of the Dangerous Road.

Behind these was an artillery platform under the command of cannoneer Ling Zhen the Heaven-Shaking Thunder. He was assisted by well over twenty men who surrounded the platform. To their rear was a section of outlaws armed with hooked poles and nooses for snaring the enemy.

Next was another massing of banners and pennants, seven each on four sides, a total of twenty-eight, embroidered with twenty-eight different constellations. In the center of these was a wool-napped, gosling-yellow flag bordered with pearls, with golden bells hanging from its lower edge and topped with plumes, indicating the headquarters of the highest commander.

Guarding this flag was Jiao Ting the Merciless, assisted by Kong Ming the Comet and Kong Liang the Flaming Star, both mounted and both in ordinary dress. In ranks to their front and rear were twenty-four brigands in iron armor and armed with wolf-toothed cudgels.

Next were embroidered generals' flags, with twelve men on each side carrying square-bladed decorated halberds. The embroidered flag on the left read: *Lu Fang the Little Duke.* The embroidered flag on the right was inscribed: *Guo Sheng the Second Rengui.* Both commanders were mounted.

Between the rows of halberdiers were infantry armed with steel pitchforks. They were led by the brothers Xie Zhen the Two-Headed Snake and Xie Bao the Twin-Tailed Scorpion, both of whom were in ordinary dress, and guarded the central army. Next, on finely saddled steeds, were two civil officers in charge of rewards and punishments. One was Xiao Rang the Master Hand, who looked after documents on Mount Liangshan. The other

was Ironclad Virtue Pei Xuan, who was the chief secretary of the stronghold.

These were followed by twenty-four security guards dressed in purple and armed with wide-bladed sabres. They were led by two executioners wearing silks and satins, who stood between the rows. The first was Iron Arm Cai Fu. The second was his brother Cai Qing, known as the Single Blossom. They stood to the fore, with sword carriers to their left and right.

Behind, in two rows, were twenty-four brigands with gold and silver lances. Each row was under a mounted commander. The twelve in the left row bore gold lances, and their commander, also bearing a lance of gold, was Xu Ning the Metal Lancer. The twelve in the right row all bore silver lances, including their mounted commander Hua Rong the Lesser Li Guang. Both leaders had a gallant yet dangerous air. Their Lancers all wore black gauze turbans with ornaments of jade leaves and gold flowers tucked under in front of the ear. The twelve gold lancers in the left row wore green, the twelve silver lancers in the right row wore purple.

Still further back were pairs in silk clothes and colorful hats, groups in pink gowns and embroidered tunics. On either side were tents of jade green, vermilion panoplies and black umbrellas, yellow axes and white whisks, floating greens and flashing purples, then two lines of twenty-four ax-halberdiers, and twenty-four in pairs bearing rods. Between these, in a single line, were three umbrellas embroidered in gold thread and three fine horses in brocaded trappings. *

Two heroic figures stood before the middle steed. The man on the left, of noble visage, was that incomparable chieftain Dai Zong the Marvellous Traveller. He held a gosling-yellow flag inscribed with the word *Order,* and was responsible for the swift transmission of all military information and troop movement directives.

The man on the right was strikingly unusual in appearance. He was that dashing chieftain so skilled at secret activities, Yan Qing the Prodigy. Slung across his back was a powerful bow and sharp-tipped arrows. He held an eyebrow-high staff and was responsible for the security of the central army.

On the far right side of the army, seated on a handsomely equipped mount beneath a blue silk canopy embroidered in gold thread was that famed Taoist of high virtue Gongsun Sheng the Dragon in the Clouds. A true reverend, he could summon the wind and call the rain, order about demons and work magic. Attached to his back were two excellent swords, and the reins in his hands were of silk.

On the far left, astride a richly caparisoned steed beneath a blue silk canopy embroidered in gold thread, was that agile-minded, ever-victorious righteous general Wu Yong the Wizard, a remarkable strategist and tactician. He held a feathered fan. A set of bronze chains hung from his waist.

In the exact center, seated on the White Jade Lion That Glows in the Night, under a bright red canopy embroidered with gold thread, was the loyal and virtuous commander-in-chief Song Jiang, originally a citizen of Yuncheng, a county seat in Jizhou Prefecture in the province of Shandong. Known as the Timely Rain and Defender of Justice, he was in full armor and carried a sword of the finest Kunwu steel. Astride his gold-saddled white horse, he observed the battlefield and directed the central army.

Behind him, on battle chargers, were thirty-five lieutenant-generals in symmetrical ranks, armed with halberds, swords, bows and arrows. Next were twenty-four trumpeters and a complete military band. Beyond the battlefield, commandoes crouched in ambush on either side.

Leading the flanking forces on the left of the central army Mu Hong the Unrestrained, seconded by his younger brother Mu Chun the Slightly Restrained, had fifteen hundred men under his command. An equal number were led by Liu Tang the Red-Haired Demon on the right, aided by Tao Zongwang the Nine-Tailed Tortoise.

In the rear position was a female contingent, all on horseback, consisting of Ten Feet of Steel in the middle, Mistress Gu the Tigress on the left, and Sun the Witch on the right. Also covering the rear were their husbands Wang Ying the Stumpy Tiger, with Sun Xin the Junior General to his left, and Zhang Qing the Vegetable Gardener to his right.

Infantry and cavalry together, the outlaw forces totalled two thousand. But their manner of deployment was not to be underestimated. From his command platform Chancellor Tong Guan looked over their nine segments within an octagon, the brigands' bold cavalry, their heroic infantry, and his soul flew from him in fright, and his heart dropped.

“I couldn't understand why government troops were defeated each time they sought to capture these bandits,” he cried. “Who knew they were so formidable!”

He watched for a long time, and heard the steady beat of the gongs and war drums of Song Jiang's army. Tong Guan came down from the platform, mounted his horse and rode to the front.

“Who dares to go fiercely forth and challenge combat?” he asked his generals.

A bold vanguard commander vaulted into the saddle and bowed to Tong Guan. “I will be glad to,” he said. “Please give the order.”

The speaker was Chen Zhu, district commander of Zhengzhou Prefecture. He wore a white robe and silver armor. His horse was bluish-white and decked with brown tassels. Chen, who wielded a long-handled sword, was deputy leader of the vanguard.

Tong Guan directed that three rolls be beaten on the golden drums, and that the red flag of the vanguard be broken out on the command platform. Chen Zhu galloped forward from the arch of pennants. Both armies set up a cry. Chen reined in, holding his blade horizontal.

“Wicked bandits, rebellious traitors,” he shouted, “the emperor's soldiers are here! Surrender, or your bones and flesh will be ground to mud! Regrets will be too late!”

From the southern end of the outlaws' position, vanguard commander Qin Ming the Thunderbolt raced his steed to the field of combat. Without a word, he rode directly at Chen Zhu, brandishing his cudgel. The horses met,

weapons waved, the cudgel struck, the blade slashed. Four arms contended, eight hoofs churned the turf.

Back and forth they fought, for more than twenty rounds. Qin Ming feinted, and let Chen Zhu move in. Chen's sword sliced the empty air. Thunderbolt raised his cudgel and brought it down with full force, smashing his opponent's helmet and cranium with a single blow. Chen Zhu fell dead beneath his steed. Shan Tinggui and Wei Dingguo, Qin Ming's deputy commanders, rode out quickly, seized the mount of the fallen foe, and escorted Qin Ming back to the outlaw lines.

Beneath the southeastern arch of pennants, General Two Spears Dong Ping watched Qin Ming win the first contest. “This has taken the wind out of the sails of the government army,” he thought. “What would be a better time than now to dash over and capture Tong Guan!”

With a thunderous roar, a spear in either hand, he smote his steed and charged across the field. Tong Guan turned his horse and rode in amid his central army. At that same moment Suo Chao the Urgent Vanguard, beneath the southwest arch of pennants, uttered a shout.

“Let's nab Tong Guan! What are we waiting for!” He galloped across the field, waving his big ax.

Since both ends were already in motion, Qin Ming ordered his entire troop of red-bannered cavalry to charge and take Tong Guan.

Truly, all of the chancellor's misdeeds came home to roost. They pursued him like black eagles chasing a purple swallow, like savage tigers after an innocent lamb.

What was the fate of Chancellor Tong Guan? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 77
The Men of Mount Liangshan Lay Ambush on All Sides Song Jiang Twice Vanquishes Chancellor Tong Guan

Three units of Song Jiang's vanguard raced across the field. They ploughed into Tong Guan's army with swords and axes and inflicted a crushing defeat. Badly mauled, the government forces scattered, abandoning arms and equipment, yelling in fright. More than ten thousand soldiers were cut down. The rest fled thirty *li* before they halted and made camp.

Wu Yong had the trumpeters blow assembly. His order was transmitted: “Stop the pursuit and slaughter. We only want to give them a sample!” The outlaws returned to their stronghold, where they reported their exploits and claimed rewards.

Tong Guan was very disturbed over the losses his army had sustained, and he summoned his generals for a conference. Feng Mei and Bi Sheng reassured him.

“Don't worry, Chancellor,” they said. “The bandits, when they learned we were coming, were able to lay out their battle positions ahead of time. Our forces were unfamiliar with the situation here, and the brigands were able to trick us. With the mountain as their base, they can move troops around and create diversions. We've had a temporary set-back because of the terrain. We'll reorganize and rest for three days to let our men regain their morale and give our horses a breather. Then we'll stretch our entire army into a long line, all on foot, and advance. We'll be like a mountain snake: If the head is attacked, the tail will come to the rescue; if the tail is attacked, the head will come to the rescue; if the middle is attacked, both head and tail will support it. Each section will be part of a continuous whole. This next battle we're sure to win.”

“An excellent plan,” said Tong Guan. “Just what I was thinking, myself.”

He issued appropriate orders. The soldiers were re-grouped and given further training.

At the fifth watch on the third day the government troops rose and ate a hearty breakfast. The horses were equipped with leather armor, the men wore iron plate. Swords and axes, bows arid arrows, all were readied. Truly, weapons flowed in a rapid stream, infantry and cavalry sped like the wind.

Generals Feng Mei and Bi Sheng led the government army, militant and imposing, in a rapid march on Liangshan Marsh. The eight columns divided into a left and right. Three hundred armored cavalry rode as advance scouts. After a while they returned and reported to Tong Guan: “We haven't seen a single enemy soldier on the field where we fought the other day.”

Suspicious, the chancellor summoned his generals and demanded: “Shall we withdraw?”

“Don't even consider it,” Feng Mei urged. “Just keep pushing on. In our long snake deployment what have we to fear?”

Forward wound the government expedition until it came to the edge of the marsh. Not an adversary was in sight. They saw only a body of water and misty reeds. On the summit of the mountain stronghold in the distance an apricot-yellow flag unfurled, but there was no other movement.

A small boat glided out of the reeds along the opposite shore. Its lone occupant, in a conical hat and coir cape, sat sideways with his back to the government troops, fishing.

“Where are the robbers?” the soldiers hailed him.

He did not respond. Tong Guan ordered his archers to shoot. Two mounted men rode down to the edge of the river, fitted arrows to their bows, and let fly. The first arrow pinged off the conical hat and dropped into the water. The second clanged against the coir cape and also landed in the river.

The marksmen were two of Tong Guan's best archers. Startled, they wheeled their steeds around and trotted back. They bowed from the saddle and reported: “Both arrows scored a hit, but they didn't penetrate! We don't know what he's wearing!”

Tong Guan dispatched three hundred crack archers of the mounted vanguard. They spread out along the river bank and shot their feathered shafts, together. The fisherman remained unperturbed. Though most of the arrows fell short, several reached the boat. But those which struck the conical hat or coir cape bounced off harmlessly.

Since the target couldn't be killed by arrows, Tong Guan sent soldiers who could swim to capture him. Forty or fifty divested themselves of their armor and clothing and plunged into the river.

From the noise to the stern of his boat, the fisherman knew they were coming. Calmly he set down his tackle and picked up the oar which was lying beside him. As each swimmer drew near, he cracked him with the oar —on the temple, the crown, or the forehead—driving him beneath the waves. The others hastily returned to the bank and sought their clothes and armor.

Tong Guan was furious. He ordered five hundred more soldiers to the river and demanded that they capture the fisherman; whoever retreated would be cut in two! The soldiers stripped on the shore and jumped in, shouting. The fisherman turned the craft around and pointed at Tong Guan on the bank.

“Thieving minister, disrupter of the nation, animal who ravages the people! So you've come here to die! Don't you know you're as good as dead!”

Enraged, Tong Guan bellowed for his cavalry archers to shoot. The fisherman laughed.

“They'll never get here in time!” He flicked off his coir cape and conical hat and dove deep.

The five hundred soldiers by then had reached the boat. Suddenly, there were wild yells among them, as they began to sink. For the fisherman was White Streak in the Waves Zhang Shun. Under his hat and cape had been a bronze helmet and bronze armor. Encased like a turtle in its shell, he had been impervious to arrows. Now with his dagger he was killing soldiers, one after another, and the river was red with blood. Those who could, fled for their lives, while Tong Guan goggled from the shore in stupefaction.

“That yellow flag on top of the mountain seems to be moving,” an officer beside him said, pointing.

The chancellor peered. Neither he nor his generals could fathom the significance. Feng Mei had a suggestion.

“How about dividing three hundred armored cavalry into two troops and sending them around both sides of the mountain to have a look at the rear?”

But as the horsemen neared the mountain, a cannon thundered from the reeds, spreading a pall of smoke. The cavalry quickly returned. “They're lying in ambush there!” they reported.

Tong Guan was stunned. Feng Mei and Bi Sheng ordered their men to stay out. Several hundred thousand soldiers waited, weapons in hand. Mounted messengers galloped to every section of the army, shouting: “Whoever runs will be executed!”

While the chancellor and his generals watched from their saddles, drums pounded on the rear of the mountain. Fierce shouts shook the heavens, and a large detachment came racing forward, all carrying yellow banners, with two valorous leaders at their head.

Riding golden brown horses were the heroic Zhu Tong the Beautiful Beard and his deputy commander Lei Heng the Winged Tiger. With them were five thousand men, mounted and on foot, eager to destroy the government soldiers. At Tong Guan's order Feng Mei and Bi Sheng rode forward to meet the foe. They drew rein at the field of combat, weapons at the ready, and swore.

“Surrender, you lawless bandits! What are you waiting for!”

Lei Heng laughed and shouted back: “Death is staring you in the face, dolts, and you don't even know it! How dare you venture to do battle with us!”

Bi Sheng was very angry. He clapped his steed and charged Lei Heng with levelled lance. The Winged Tiger spurred his mount. The horses met, the weapons clashed. Over twenty rounds the contenders fought with neither besting the other.

Feng Mei, seeing that Bi Sheng couldn't win, smote his mount and rode to join the fray, waving his sword. Zhu Tong uttered a cry and galloped, brandishing his blade, to intercept Feng Mei. Four horses, two sets of

battlers, fought splendidly on the field of combat. Tong Guan kept exclaiming in admiration.

Just as the contest was reaching its climax Zhu Tong and Lei Heng executed a feint, turned their mounts, and rode towards their original position. Feng Mei and Bi Sheng, reluctant to let them go, gave chase. The outlaw force, shouting, withdrew in the direction of the rear of the mountain. Tong Guan led his army in hot pursuit past the foot of the mountain.

On the summit, trumpets blared. The government troops looked up. From before and behind, cannon balls whistled overhead. Tong Guan realized that enemy forces were hiding in ambush. He ordered a halt.

An apricot-yellow banner unfurled on the mountain top, embroidered with the words: *Act in Heaven's Behalf.* Skirting the side of the slope Tong Guan saw amid a phalanx of colored pennants and banners on the heights the figure of Song Jiang, world-renowned hero from Yuncheng County in Shandong and Defender of Justice. Behind him were his generals Wu Yong, Gongsun Sheng, Hua Rong and Xu Ning, plus his Gold and Silver Lancers.

Angrily Tong Guan ordered a contingent to go up and seize Song Jiang. Two columns prepared to ascend the slope. The sound of beating drums and hearty laughter floated down. Tong Guan's rage grew, and he ground his teeth.

“That robber dares to toy with me,” he grated. “I'll capture him myself!”

“Chancellor, you must have a plan,” Feng Mei said. “Don't go into danger personally. Call back our army and we'll investigate further. After that we can advance.”

“Nonsense! We've already come this far. Why should we withdraw! We've been ordered to engage the bandits as quickly as possible. Now, we've seen them. We can't retreat!”

Before the words were out of his mouth, shouts were heard from the rear army, and a scout reported: “Due west, from behind the mountain, a strong force has emerged and split our rear army in two!”

Tong Guan, startled, hurried to the rescue with Feng Mei and Bi Sheng. At that moment behind the mountain on the east side drums sounded and out rushed another contingent. Half carried red banners, half carried blue. Five thousand infantry and cavalry, they were headed by two generals.

Qin Ming the Thunderbolt commanded the red banners, Guan Sheng the Big Halberd led the blues.

The two galloped up on their horses and shouted: “Tong Guan surrender your head!”

Enraged, the chancellor sent Feng Mei against Guan Sheng and Bi Sheng against Qin Ming. Angry shouts in his rear army intensified, but Tong Guan had the trumpets call assembly. He ordered his rear to fall back, and not be impatient for combat.

Zhu Tong and Lei Heng, leading a force of yellow banners, again attacked, this time in a pincers movement. The government troops were thrown into confusion. Feng Mei and Bi Sheng protected Tong Guan, and he fled for his life. An outlaw force, five thousand strong, cut in at an angle and intercepted them. Half of this unit bore white banners, the other half black. Commanding the blacks was Two Rods Huyan Zhuo, commanding the whites was Panther Head Lin Chong.

The two shouted from their horses: “Treacherous Tong Guan, where do you think you're going? Stand and be killed!” They charged in directly among the government soldiers.

Duan Pengju, district commander of Suizhou, took on Huyan Zhuo. Ma Wanli, district commander of Ruzhou, contended with Lin Chong. Ma commenced to weaken after only several rounds. As he turned to flee, Lin Chong uttered a roar. Hopelessly flurried, Ma was pierced by Lin's thrust. He fell dead beneath his horse.

Duan Pengju lost his appetite for battle at the sight of his companion's body. He parried Huyan's rods, wheeled his mount around, and galloped away.

Huyan gave chase, and the two armies clashed in a general melee. Tong Guan scrambled to get back to his own forces. Wild shouts rose in the forward ranks. From behind the mountain a contingent of brigand infantry came running, and ploughed into the very center of the government army. It was led by a monk and a pilgrim, who yelled: “Don't let Tong Guan escape!”

The monk never read the scriptures but specialized in slaughter. He was Sagacious Lu, otherwise known as the Tattooed Monk. The pilgrim had killed the tiger on Jingyang Ridge. He was Wu Song, the boldest hero in the marsh-girt stronghold. Lu with his Buddhist staff, and Wu with his pair of swords, slashed into the government position.

The outlaw infantry charge shattered the imperial army into segments. Both advance and retreat were impossible. Tong Guan could only, with Feng Mei and Bi Sheng, break through the encirclement and hack a bloody path to the rear of the mountain. Just as they were catching their breath, they again heard the thunder of cannon and the pounding of drums. Another contingent of outlaw infantry, headed by two commanders, stopped them once more.

Xie Zhen and Xie Bao, each with a five-tined pitchfork, led their infantry in a headlong attack. Tong Guan and his men could not be checked. They broke through the barrier. But assailed from five sides by outlay forces on horse and on foot the government army was fragmented. Tong Guan fled, protected by Feng Mei and Bi Sheng.

The Xie brothers, with their pitchforks, rushed towards the mounted generals. Tong Guan clapped his horse and galloped off at an angle. Feng Mei and Bi Sheng, hurrying to cover his rear, met the district commanders of Tangzhou and Dengzhou—Han Tianlin and Wang Yi, and the four, together, fought their way out.

They hadn't gone very far, and were just catching their breaths, when they saw before them a cloud of dust and heard fierce yells. Out of a leafy green glade flew a mounted troop, headed by two commanders, and obstructed their road. General Two Spears Dong Ping and Urgent Vanguard Suo Chao charged directly at Tong Guan without a word.

Wang Yi, with levelled lance, tried to intercept them, but Suo Chao raised his ax and cut him from his steed. Han Tianlin, attempting a rescue, was pierced through by Dong Ping's spears. Feng Mei and Bi Sheng again galloped off with Tong Guan, striving desperately to save him. Drums beat on all sides. They had no idea from which direction the enemy was coming.

Tong Guan hauled his mount to the top of a bluff and looked. Four contingents of Liangshan Marsh cavalry, two auxiliaries and two units of infantry had surrounded the government troops and were sweeping through them like giant baskets and scoops, scattering them like clouds before the wind. The soldiers were running, panic-stricken, east and west.

A troop appeared at the foot of the slope. Tong Guan recognized the banners of district commanders Wu Bingyi of Chenzhou and Li Ming of Xuzhou. Their soldiers, beaten and bedraggled, carrying broken weapons, had come around Mount Linlang, seeking a place to hide. When Tong Guan hailed them, they turned their horses and started up the slope eagerly. But from the side of the mountain there were shouts, and a troop of cavalry charged forth. They bore two identifying banners and were led by Yang Zhi and Shi Jin. These two commanders, waving their blades, barred the way of the government officers.

Li Ming with levelled lance advanced on Yang Zhi. Wu rode against Shi Jin with crescent-bladed halberd. The two pairs fought up and down the slope and round and round, each man exerting his utmost skill. Tong Guan, reined in on the bluff, didn't know which to watch.

The four battled for over thirty rounds. Wu thrust at his opponent's heart. Shi Jin twisted, and the halberd slipped by his ribs, horse and rider following the impetus of the lunge. Shi Jin swung his blade, and a bloody head, still encased in its golden helmet, dropped to the ground. Wu's body collapsed beside it.

Li Ming decided he'd better go. But a terrible roar from Yang Zhi scared the soul out of him and set him to trembling so violently that his lance slipped from his nerveless fingers. Yang Zhi chopped with his sword. Li Ming dodged and the blade struck his horse's loins. As its rear quarters sank Li leaped from the saddle. He cast aside his lance and ran. But Yang Zhi with a

swift slash cut him down. Poor Li Ming, half his life an army officer, and now it was all gone like a dream.

The two district commanders lay dead on the slope. Yang Zhi and Shi Jin pursued the demoralized government troops, cutting heads like melons.

Tong Guan, with Feng Mei and Bi Sheng on the bluff, dared not go down. At a loss he asked his two generals: “How can we break out of here?”

“Calm yourself, Chancellor,” said Feng Mei. “I see an encampment of ours due south. As long as their flag still flies, we can be saved. Commander Bi will remain to protect you, and I will carve open a path and bring them to your rescue.”

“The day is growing late,” said the chancellor. “Watch for a suitable moment and dash over and return soon.”

Grasping his long-handled sword, Feng Mei rode quickly down the slope, and galloped full tilt along the road south. He found the unit under district commander Zhou Xin of Songzhou. They were in a tight formation and were resisting staunchly. Feng Mei was led into the position.

“Where is the chancellor?” Zhou Xin asked.

“On that slope, ahead. He's waiting for your unit to rescue him. There's no time to waste! Get started immediately!”

Zhou Xin ordered his infantry and cavalry to coordinate closely. No one was to fall behind. Body and mind, all were to combine their efforts. With the two commanders leading the shouting troops, the detachment hastened towards the slope.

Before they had gone the length of an arrow-shot a unit cut in from the side. Feng Mei rode forward to engage them, waving his sword. But then he recognized Duan Pengju, district commander of Suizhou. The three joined forces and continued to the foot of the slope. Bi Sheng came down to meet them, and escorted them to the bluff.

They conferred with Tong Guan, who queried: “Shall we fight out of here tonight, or wait until morning?”

“We four will defend you to the death, Chancellor,” Feng Mei assured him. “If we break through the encirclement tonight we'll be able to escape the bandits.”

As darkness began to fall they heard yells without end on every side and the disorderly beating of drums. Around the second watch the moon was bright. With Feng Mei in the lead and all grouped around Tong Guan in a protective phalanx they made a concerted rush down the slope.

At once, voices shouted: “Don't let Tong Guan get away!”

The officers fought in a due southerly direction. By the fourth watch, after a confused battle, they finally broke through. Tong Guan, on horseback, pressed his fingers to his forehead and reverently thanked the gods of Heaven and Earth.

“How fortunate that we could escape this calamity!” He and his party pushed out of the area and hastened towards Jizhou. Just as they were congratulating themselves they saw on the slope of a mountain ahead a procession of countless torches. Behind them shouts rose once more.

In the light of the flaming brands they could see two bold fellows armed with halberds, walking in advance of a heroic general on a white horse. The rider, who carried a steel-tipped lance, was none other than Lu Junyi the Jade Unicorn, also known as Lu the Magnate. The halberdiers preceding him were Yang Xiong the Pallid and Shi Xiu the Rash. Their force of over three thousand, brimming with militant spirit, now intercepted the government unit.

Lu shouted: “Tong Guan dismount and be bound! What are you waiting for?”

“Enemy soldiers are before and behind us,” the chancellor said to his cohorts. “What are we going to do?”

“I'll defend you with my life, Chancellor,” said Feng Mei. “We officers will protect you and wrest a way to Jizhou! I'll fight that robber personally!”

Striking his mount, he cantered towards Lu, brandishing his sword. The horses met and the men battled. After only a few rounds Lu parried the big sword with his lance, closed in quickly, and grasped Feng around the waist, simultaneously lifting him from the saddle and kicking his steed away. Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu rushed to Lu's support, while outlaw troops dragged off the prisoner.

Bi Sheng, Zhou Xin and Duan Pengju, desperately defending Tong Guan, hurled their soldiers against the brigades preventing their passage, fighting as they advanced. Lu the Magnate gave chase. Tong Guan's beaten army scurried like a bereaved family's dog, darted like fish which escaped the net.

By dawn they had shaken off their pursuers. Jizhou was in sight when, from around the bend of a mountain ahead, a body of infantry shot out. They wore iron breastplates and pink silk turbans, and were led by four commanders.

Who were they? Li Kui with his two axes, Bao Xu holding a sword, and Xiang Chong and Li Gun each wielding spiked shields. They rolled down the slope like a ball of fire, slaughtering government soldiers left and right.

Tong Guan and his officers fled, fighting as they ran. Li Kui carved into the imperial cavalry and cut the legs of Duan Pengju's steed from under it. Raising his axes, with one blow he cracked Duan's skull, with another he sliced his throat. Duan was finished.

When the remnant government troops finally neared Jizhou they were in a sorry state, their helmets over one ear, their neck guards halfway up their cheeks. Men and horses were exhausted. They stopped at a stream to drink and water the animals. A cannon suddenly boomed, and arrows flew at them like a swarm of hornets. Hastily, the soldiers scrambled back up the bank. A troop of cavalry trotted out of a grove, headed by three heroes.

They were Featherless Arrow Zhang Qin, plus Gong Wang and Ding Desun, commanding well over three hundred horsemen. Little bronze bells

tinkled on the bridles of the steeds, and they were bedecked with plumes and red tassels. The riders carried light bows and arrows, embroidered pennants and decorated spears. Led by their three commanders, they charged.

They were not a large force, and Zhou Xin rode forward to meet them, while Bi Sheng covered Tong Guan's hasty departure. Zhang Qin grasped Zhou's extended lance with his left hand. His right hand pulled back in a throwing position.

“Take that!” he cried, and a stone struck Zhou on the bridge of his nose, knocking him from his saddle.

Gong Wang and Ding Desun galloped up, and pierced Zhou's throat with their pitchforks. Like grass blighted by frost, like blossoms pelted in the rain, he expired beneath his horse's legs.

The fleeing Tong Guan and Bi Sheng dared not enter Jizhou, but led their remnant force instead through the night in the direction of the Eastern Capital. En route they picked up other escaping soldiers, and together made camp.

Song Jiang, a benevolent and virtuous man, who sought only to shun wickedness and become law-abiding again, had no desire to pursue and slaughter. Afraid his officers would be reluctant to abandon the chase, he immediately dispatched Dai Zong with an order to all his chieftains to gather their commands and return to the mountain stronghold and claim Everywhere trumpets sounded assembly. Commanders in the saddle rhythmically beat their weapons against their metal stirrups, and the infantry sang songs of victory as the outlaw troops, unit by unit, entered Liangshan Marsh and marched into the Water-Girt Fortress.

Seated with Wu Yong and Gongsun Sheng in Loyalty Hall, Song directed Pei Xuan to distribute the individual awards. Feng Mei, who had been captured by Lu the Magnate and delivered, bound, to the stronghold, knelt outside the hall. Song Jiang personally untied him, led him into the hall and invited him to be seated. He apologized for having inconvenienced him, and poured him wine to calm his fears. All of the chieftains had gathered, and

that day there was general feasting and the dispensing of rewards to the troops.

After two days, Feng Mei was furnished with a saddled horse and preparations were made to escort him down the mountain. He was overjoyed. Song Jiang again apologized.

“Please forgive us for venturing to display our prowess on the battlefield, General,” he said. “Our only desire is to obey the emperor and serve our country. Because we've been outlawed we've been compelled to behave in this manner. When you arrive at the imperial court, please explain for us. If we can some day bask again in the light of royal favor, we will never forget your great kindness, living or dead.”

Feng Mei kowtowed and thanked Song Jiang for having spared him. Song Jiang supplied an escort which saw him out of the brigands' territory. Feng Mei went back to the capital. Of that we'll say no more.

Again in Loyalty Hall, Song Jiang conferred with Wu Yong and the other chieftains. All of the ambushes deployed during the battle had been planned by Wu Yong. So devastating had been the slaughter that Tong Guan was chilled with fear. Even his dreams were terror-ridden. He had lost two-thirds of his army.

“Once Tong Guan reaches the capital and reports to the emperor he's sure to raise another expedition,” Wu Yong predicted. “We must send a man to learn what's going on. Then we can make suitable preparations.”

“I agree completely,” said Song Jiang. “But which of our brothers should it be?

“Let me go,” said someone among those seated in the hall.

The others all looked, and they said: “He would be ideal. He's capable of big things.”

And because this person went, hundreds of war craft were constructed outside the walls of Jizhou, and on Mount Liangshan a huge store of grain

was added. Truly, battle chargers perished at the foot of the blue cliffs, boats cutting the waves sank in the weedy green waters.

Who was the man who went from Mount Liangshan to investigate? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 78
Ten Commandants Confer on Taking Liangshan Marsh
Song Jiang Defeats Marshal Gao the First Time

The volunteer was Dai Zong the Marvellous Traveller. Song Jiang said: “We depend entirely on you to find out all about their military preparations. But you'd better have someone to help.”

“I'll be glad to go along,” said Li Kui.

Song Jiang laughed. “You, Black Whirlwind who never stirs up trouble!”

“I won't make any trouble this time.”

Song Jiang shouted at him to get out, then asked: “Which of you brothers will go?”

“How about me?” queried Liu Tang the Red-Haired Demon.

“Good,” said Song Jiang. He was very pleased.

That day the two men packed some belongings and went down the mountain.

Meanwhile, Tong Guan and Bi Sheng neared the Eastern Capital with forty thousand men, all that was left of their beaten army. They ordered their commanders to lead the various units back to their camps. Tong Guan and Bi Sheng entered the capital with only the imperial guards. The chancellor removed his armor and went to call on Marshal Gao.

The two exchanged courtesies, and Tong was invited to be seated in a quiet alcove of the rear hall. He related in detail the defeats he suffered in two

major encounters, the killing of his eight top commanders, his heavy losses in troops and horses, the capture of Feng Mei, and his own general dismay.

“Don't let it upset you, Chancellor,” said Gao. “All you have to do is give the emperor a false report. Who would dare petition against you! I'll go with you to the prime minister. We'll work something out.”

Tong and Gao mounted their horses and rode to the premier's mansion. An aide announced: “Chancellor Tong has returned.” Prime Minister Cai Jing guessed that he had been defeated, and when told that Gao Qiu was calling with him, directed that they be ushered into his study. Tong kowtowed before the premier, his tears falling like rain.

“Don't take it so hard,” said Cai. “I've heard you've had heavy losses.”

“In that bandit marsh it's impossible to advance without boats,” said Gao. “The chancellor had only cavalry and foot soldiers. That's why he lost the initiative and fell for the bandits' ruse.”

Tong told about his defeat, and the premier said: “You lost an enormous number of troops, expended vast amounts of money and grain, and had eight column commanders annihilated. How dare I report this to the emperor?”

Tong Guan again kowtowed. “Cover up for me, Premier, I beg you! Save my life!”

“Tomorrow, at the royal audience, I will say only: 'The weather was extremely hot, our soldiers were not accustomed to it. So they discontinued the action and withdrew.' If he grows angry and says: 'This canker in our hearts must be eliminated, otherwise, the results will be calamitous.' how should I reply?” queried the premier.

“I don't mean to boast,” said Gao. “But if you allow me to lead an expedition, I'll pacify those bandits in one engagement!”

“Since you're willing to go yourself, Marshal, naturally that's fine. I'll propose you tomorrow for commander-in-chief.”

“There's just one thing. Besides an imperial decree mustering an army, I need boats. They should either be allocated from military and civilian craft, or I should be authorized to buy lumber at the official price and build my own ships of battle. Only by advancing simultaneously on land and on water, on boats and on horseback, will we be able to win the day.”

“That won't be any problem,” said Cai.

The keeper of the gate came in and said: “Feng Mei has returned.”

Tong Guan was delighted. The premier directed that he enter. He asked the general what had happened.

Feng Mei kowtowed. “Song Jiang released as many as possible of those he captured and took the rest up the mountain. Not only didn't he kill us, but he gave us travel expenses and allowed us to return home. It is for that reason that I am able to see you noble countenance again.”

“It's a bandit trick and an insult to our government,” said Gao. “We shouldn't muster local troops, but go as far afield as Shandong and Hebei to select able men who'll go with me.”

“Since we're all agreed,” said Cai, “we'll meet again tomorrow and petition the emperor.”

Tong and Gao returned to their respective headquarters.

They met again in the Waiting Chamber the following day at three strokes after the fifth watch. When the drums sounded, officials assembled in the imperial courtyard according to rank. All kowtowed, then arose and stood below the Jade Staircase in two groups—one civil, the other military.

The chief of ceremonies, holding his staff of office, called: “If anyone has a petition, let him come forward. If there are none, this court will adjourn.”

Prime Minister Cai stepped forth and addressed the emperor. “We dispatched Tong Guan, Chancellor of Military Affairs, with a large army in a punitive expedition against the bandits of Liangshan Marsh. But the

weather turned very hot and our forces had not yet adapted to it. Moreover, the bandit territory is all water and bogs. It's impossible to move without boats. Our infantry and cavalry were unable to advance. And so the expedition was called off and our forces returned to their camps, where they are waiting now for your imperial orders."

"How can they go again, since the weather is so hot?" cried the emperor.

"Tong Guan Will report to the Military Procurate for punishment. We propose appointing a new commander and sending out another expedition. We request your royal decree."

"Those brigands are indeed a canker in our heart. They must be exterminated. But who will undertake this task for me?"

Gao Qiu stepped forward. "Though I have no talents, I would gladly strain like a beast of burden to wipe out the bandits. I beg for your imperial command."

"Since you are willing to share my difficulties, I order you to muster an army."

"Liangshan Marsh is over eight hundred *li* in circumference. Without fighting ships it is impossible to advance. I request permission, therefore, to cut timber in the neighborhood of the marsh and have carpenters build boats. Either that, or grant me funds with which to buy civilian boats and convert them to military use."

"I authorize you to do whatever is necessary and possible. Only avoid causing harm to the people."

"I would never dare! Please don't set too strict a time limit, and I will endeavor to succeed."

The emperor called for silken robes and golden armor, and presented them to Marshal Gao Qiu. He also selected an auspicious day for the expedition to commence.

When the imperial audiences ended, Tong Guan and Gao Qiu saw the prime minister back to his mansion. Cai directed the Council of Administration to transmit the royal decree for the mustering of a new expeditionary army.

“There are ten commandants who distinguished themselves in expeditions against neighboring states like the Guifang, the Tangut, the Golden Tartars, or the Great Liao,” said Gao. “They're excellent military men. I'd like you to appoint them my generals.”

Premier Cai agreed. He issued a directive ordering the ten commandants to report at Jizhou with ten thousand crack troops each. All of the leaders had formerly been robbers in the greenwood. Later, they were amnestied, and rose rapidly to become high officials. Skilful and courageous, they won something of a reputation for themselves. Now, they received directives ordering them to Jizhou within a prescribed time, each heading a column of ten thousand, on pain of military discipline if they were late.

In the Jiankang district of Jinling was a naval unit. Its commanding officer was a man named Dragon Dream Liu, because his mother, when she conceived him, had dreamed that a black dragon had entered her womb. He grew up to be an excellent swimmer. Liu won distinction in a campaign against bandits on the Xiajiang River in Sichuan and was raised to the rank of admiral. He had fifteen thousand sailors under his command, and five hundred rowed vessels. His responsibility was the area south of the river.

Gao wanted this naval unit and its boats, and he ordered their immediate transfer. He also sent a trusted confidant, an infantry colonel named Niu Pangxi, to search up and down the river and along all its tributaries for more boats. Niu was to bring any craft he found to Jizhou where they were to be turned over for Gao's use.

There were many generals in Gao's headquarters. Two of the most able of these were brothers—Dang Shiying and Dang Shixiong, both field commanders and both extremely brave. From the imperial guards, Gao drew another fifteen thousand crack troops, bringing his total force up to a hundred and thirty thousand. He had grain delivered to the various columns, so that it could be issued to the troops during their march. Daily, he had

armor and clothing put in order, and pennants and banners manufactured. But he still was not ready.

Meanwhile, Dai Zong and Liu Tang spent a few days in the Eastern Capital collecting information. Then they hastened back through the night to the mountain fortress and rendered a detailed report. When Song Jiang heard that Marshal Gao was personally going to lead an expedition against him, and that he had gathered a hundred and thirty thousand troops from all over, and that ten commandants would be serving as generals, he was shocked and frightened. He went into conference with Wu Yong.

“Have no fear, brother,” said the military advisor. “Didn't Zhuge Liang defeat Cao Cao's army of a hundred thousand in ancient times with only three thousand men? I've heard of those ten commandants. They've served the imperial court well. Of course they appeared very heroic when there was no one around who could match them. But today, against our band of fine brothers—veritable wolves and tigers every one— they're out of date. You've nothing to worry about. Before the ten columns arrive, I'll give them a scare!”

“How will you do that?”

“They're to meet in Jizhou. I'll send two quick killers to wait in the outskirts. When the troops draw near, they'll slaughter a few.”

“Who do you have in mind?”

“Featherless Arrow Zhang Qin and General Two Spears Dong Ping.”

Song Jiang gave the two named chieftains a thousand men each. He ordered them to patrol the outskirts of Jizhou, and intercept and kill approaching government troops. He also directed his naval commanders to prepare to seize enemy boats. Assignments were given, as well, to other chieftains. No need to say what these were; you'll learn later on.

Although more than twenty days had passed Gao was still in the capital. The emperor sent a message urging him to march. Gao ordered his Imperial Guards force to leave the city first, and he directed some thirty-odd singers

and dancers, girls and boys from the entertainment quarter, to go along for their amusement.

On the date of the Guards' departure, Gao pledged before the flag, took his leave of the emperor, and got ready to set forth. A month had gone by, and it was now typical early autumn weather. Government officials, large and small, were waiting at the pavilion ten *li* beyond the city gate to see them off. Marshal Gao, in full armor, rode a battle charger with a golden saddle. Preceding him were five auxiliary mounts with equipage encrusted with jade. To his left and right were the brothers Dang Shiying and Dang Shixiong. Behind came generals of the Imperial Guards, masters of arms, generals of defense, generals of militia, and other high-ranking officers. The army which followed marched in neat ranks.

At the pavilion Gao dismounted and bid the assembled officials farewell. The ceremonial wine-drinking send-off completed, he again climbed into the saddle and proceeded towards Jizhou. He allowed his soldiers to pillage freely en route, much to the detriment of the local population.

One after another the ten columns neared Jizhou. Commandant Wang Wente, at the head of his column, was more than forty *li* from his destination after a forced march. He was still driving hard when they reached a place called Phoenix Tail Slope. At the foot of the slope was a large grove. Wang's advance unit was just skirting this when they heard the crash of a gong.

From between the rear of the grove and the base of the hill a troop of cavalry trotted out and blocked the road. Its leader wore a helmet and armor and carried a bow and arrows. Attached to the sheath and quiver of these weapons were two small yellow pennants. One was inscribed: *Heroic General Two Spears.* The other read: *Gallant Duke of Ten Thousand Households.* In each hand he grasped a steel-tipped spear. It was none other than Dong Ping, the boldest assault leader in Liangshan Marsh, known as Dong the Brash.

He reined in his steed athwart the road and shouted: “Where are you from? Come down from your mounts and be tied. What are you waiting for?”

Wang checked his horse and laughed. “Even jars and jugs have two ears. You must have heard of us ten commandants. We've won scores of commendations, we're famous. I'm Wang Wente, the foremost among us.”

Dong Ping laughed. “You're a rustic lout who couldn't kill anyone but his mother's lover!”

Commandant Wang was furious. “Rebellious bandit! How dare you insult me!”

He clapped his horse, levelled his lance and charged. Dong Ping, both spears horizontal, met him head on. They fought for thirty rounds, with neither emerging the victor.

Wang realized he couldn't defeat Dong Ping. “Rest a while,” he shouted. He rode back to his position. Wang instructed his column not to remain and give battle but to break through.

With the commandant in the lead, the column smashed open the road block and, yelling, fought their way free. Dong Ping and his men followed in close pursuit. As the column passed the grove, another cavalry troop appeared suddenly before them. In the lead was Featherless Arrow Zhang Qin.

“Halt!” he shouted.

He flung a stone at Wang Wente's head. Wang tried to dodge, but it struck him on the helmet. Bending low over his saddle, Wang fled. The two chieftains gave chase. They had nearly caught up, when another unit cut in ahead at an angle. Wang recognized the column led by Commandant Yang Wen, hurrying to his rescue. Dong Ping and Zhang Qin dared not come any closer. They withdrew.

The two columns entered Jizhou, where they were received by the prefect Zhang Shuye. A few days later word came that Marshal Gao and his army were approaching. The ten commandants went out to meet him, and escorted him into the city. The prefectural office was converted temporarily into an army headquarters, and all rested.

Marshal Gao ordered the ten columns to camp in the outskirts of Jizhou. When Dragon Dream Liu arrived with his naval forces they would all set forth together. The columns did as directed, felling timber on the nearby hills and confiscating doors and windows of the villagers to build shelters and make beds for themselves. They caused severe losses to the local people.

Gao remained in his headquarters in the city, grabbing more recruits for his expedition. Anyone who had no silver for bribes was put in the foremost assault ranks. But if a man was able to spread a bit of money around he stayed in the central army and received frequent commendations for “valor.” There was a great deal of this kind of corruption.

Dragon Dream Liu and his flotilla arrived after only a day or two, and Liu reported to Gao. The marshal summoned the ten commandants to join them in a strategy conference. Wang Huan had a proposal.

“Let the infantry and cavalry go ahead and lure out the bandits, then send in the naval forces to destroy their lair. They won't be able to fight on two fronts, and we'll capture them all.”

Gao agreed. He ordered Wang Huan and Xu Jing to lead the vanguard, Wang Wente and Mei Zhan to bring up the rear, Zhang Kai and Yang Wen to command the left flank, Han Cunbao and Li Congji to command the right, Xiang Yuanzhen and Jing Zhong to be ready as reinforcements for front and rear. Dang Shixiong with three thousand crack troops joined the flotilla to aid Dragon Dream Liu and observe the battle.

Each unit now had its orders. After three days of preparation, they invited Gao to review them. The marshal came out of the city and personally inspected the columns, one by one. He then directed them, plus the naval forces, to set out for Liangshan Marsh.

Dong Ping and Zhang Qin returned to the fortress and gave a detailed report. Song Jiang and his chieftains led the outlaw army down the mountain. Before they had gone very far, they came within sight of the foe. The adversary forces halted within arrow shot of each another and set up

their battle positions. Commandant Wang Huan rode forward from the government vanguard, carrying a long lance.

“Unrighteous bandits, desperate rustics,” he shouted, “do you recognize General Wang Huan?”

The embroidered banners on the opposite side parted and Song Jiang rode forth. “Commandant Wang,” he called respectfully, “you're of a venerable age. You shouldn't be going into combat for the state. Your opponent might make a slip and put an end to your blameless life. Go back. Send a younger man to fight.”

Wang was furious. “The mark of the criminal is on your face, petty functionary! Dare you oppose Heaven's soldiers!”

“Don't insist, Commandant. These bold fellows of mine who 'act on Heaven's behalf' wouldn't necessarily lose to you.”

Wang Huan's reply was to level his lance and charge. From behind Song Jiang a warrior rode out, his own lance horizontal, the bells on his steed's bridle jingling. It was Panther Head Lin Chong, and he galloped to engage his adversary.

The horses met, the soldiers yelled. Marshal Gao reined in his steed and watched from the front lines. The men on both sides shouted and cheered. Cavalrymen rose in their stirrups and infantrymen pushed back their helmets to get a better view. The contestants displayed their utmost skill.

Nearly eighty rounds they fought, with neither emerging the victor. Trumpets sounded and the combatants separated and returned to their positions. Commandant Jing Zhong went to the forward army and bowed from the saddle to Marshal Gao.

“I would like to have a go at the bandits. I request your permission.”

Gao ordered Jing to proceed. Bridle bells behind Song Jiang again jingled and Huyan Zhuo rode out to meet the challenger. Jing, wielding a long-

handled blade, was astride a melon-yellow steed. The contenders met and fought twenty rounds.

Huyan executed a feint, parried the big blade, and brought his steel rods with full force down on Jing's head, spattering his brain matter. Eyes bulging, Jing fell to the ground, dead.

Gao had lost one of his commandants. He urgently dispatched another — Xiang Yuanzhen. Xiang flew to the front with levelled lance. “Bandits,” he cried, “who dares do battle with me?” General Two Spears Dong Ping surged to the front and engaged the enemy. Before they had fought ten rounds Xiang whirled his mount around and rode off, trailing his lance. Dong Ping clapped his horse and chased after him. Instead of entering his position, Xiang, apparently flurried, skirted its edge and continued to flee, with Dong Ping in hot pursuit.

Xiang socketed his lance, grasped his bow with his left hand, fitted an arrow with his right, and stretched the string to its full. Suddenly, he twisted around and shot. At the twang of the bow, Dong Ping threw up a warding hand, but the arrow struck him in the right arm. He dropped his lance and galloped back. Xiang, now the pursuer, readied another arrow. Huyan Zhuo and Lin Chong hastened out and escorted Dong to the safety of the position.

Marshal Gao ordered a mass attack just as Song Jiang was directing that Dong Ping be returned to fortress. The rear guard was unable to hold, and the outlaws scattered. Gao chased them as far as the water's edge. There he dispatched scouts to make contact with the government naval forces.

These, meanwhile, under Dragon Dream Liu and Dang Shixiong, were winding deep into the marsh. Mist and reeds obscured the creeks and rivulets. The masts of the government flotilla were strung out over a distance of ten *li*.

A cannon sounded from the mountain slope, and from every side small boats converged. The soldiers on the government craft, who were rather frightened to begin with, completely panicked when they saw the small craft swarming out from the depths of the reeds and cutting the government vessels off from each other. Most of them abandoned ship and fled. The

bold fellows of Mount Liangshan were quick to take advantage of the confusion. Beating drums and gongs, they propelled their small boats forward.

Dragon Dream Liu and Dang Shixiong hastily turned their vessel around. But the shallow channel they had navigated earlier had been jammed with logs and brushwood by the outlaws, snagging oars and blocking passage.

More soldiers leaped into the water. Dragon Dream Liu divested himself of his armor, crawled up the bank, and struck out along a path. Dang Shixiong, unwilling to leave the vessel, ordered the sailors to row into a tributary.

Before they had gone two *li*, they saw ahead three small boats, commanded by the three Ruan brothers, each of whom grasped a spear. As the boats neared the government craft, the remaining government soldiers jumped into the water. Dang stood alone on the prow with a long lance, facing Ruan the Second. As the boats of Ruan the Fifth and Ruan the Seventh pressed closer, Ruan the Second dived into the water. Dang realized his danger. He, too, jumped, abandoning his lance.

Suddenly, Zhang Heng the boat hand shot up from beneath. He grabbed Dang by the hair and around the waist, and tossed him dripping into the reeds. A dozen or so brigands who had been hiding there tied Dang securely and took him off to the fortress.

Gao saw that his entire flotilla was in disarray and that his men were fleeing towards the mountains. His boats, all bearing the flag of Dragon Dream Liu, had been rounded up and captured. Gao's water approach had failed. He ordered his troops back to Jizhou. New measures would have to be considered.

It was late in the day when they started their march. All around cannon suddenly thundered and Song Jiang's forces attacked from several sides. Marshal Gao could only groan in dismay.

Truly, happiness has not yet arrived when trouble returns, illness has just receded when misery descends again. A marshal became a man who had lost his way, ten columns of militant soldiers turned into a defeated rabble.

And as a result, army-men could not return to their camps, naval forces fled to a dream world.

How did Marshal Gao and his ten-column army escape? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 79
Liu Tang Burns the Ships of War
Song Jiang Defeats Marshal Gao the Second Time

Although the artillery were only signal cannon firing blanks, and no outlaws were lying in ambush, Marshal Gao was frightened. He had no belly for further battle. He scurried back to Jizhou with his troops that same night. His infantry casualties were not high, but he had lost more than half his naval effectives, and not a single war ship returned.

Dragon Dream Liu managed to get back, after considerable difficulty. Sailors who were able to swim, had escaped. Those who could not, had all drowned.

His military prestige damaged, his energies depleted, Gao could only encamp in the city and wait for Niu Pangxi to arrive with fresh boats. He sent a dispatch to Niu urging speed: Niu was to seize any craft he could lay his hands on, bring it to Jizhou, and fit it out for the next expedition.

At the fortress Song Jiang returned first with Dong Ping. Doctor An Daoquan removed the arrow and dressed the wound with Golden Spear Ointment, and directed Dong to rest. Wu Yong and the other chieftains arrived next. Zhang Heng, head of the naval forces, brought Dang Shixiong to Loyalty Hall and claimed his reward. Song Jiang ordered that the prisoner be taken to the rear of the fortress and held under house arrest. The captured boats were to be distributed among the various chieftains commanding the water defenses.

In Jizhou Marshal Gao summoned his generals into council to discuss strategy against Mount Liangshan. Commandant Xu Jing spoke.

“I started wandering as a child,” he said. “When I grew up and was giving exhibitions of arms and peddling medicines I made friends with a man. He's a skilled strategist and tactician, and has the talent of Sun Wu and Wu Qi—those ancient theoreticians of war—and the wisdom of Zhuge Liang. His name is Wen Huanzhang. He teaches school in the village of Anren on the outskirts of the Eastern Capital. If we could get him to be our chief of staff he could defeat Wu Yong's crafty schemes.”

Gao at once sent a top-ranking general, with gifts of silks and a saddle horse, to invite the village teacher to come to Jizhou as quickly as possible and advise on military affairs. Only three or four days after the general departed, a report came from outside the city: “Song Jiang has arrived with his army. He challenges us to fight.”

Marshal Gao was furious. He mustered the troops in the city and sallied forth. He also directed the commandants of the various forts to go out and give battle.

When Song Jiang saw Gao and his army approaching, he hastily drew back fifteen *li* to a broad, level plain. Gao closed in pursuit. Song Jiang's forces set up positions at the edge of a mountain slope. From a troop bearing red banners a fierce-looking commander burst forward. On his banner were the words: *Two Rods Huyan Zhuo.* He reined in his steed and halted at the edge of the battlefield, his lance held athwart.

“That's the fellow who commanded the emperor's chain-linked cavalry and sold out to the enemy,” snarled Gao. He sent Commandant Han Cunbao, who wielded a crescent-bladed halberd, forth to meet him.

Without a word, the two clashed, one hacking with his halberd, the other thrusting with his lance, neither slackening for a moment. For more than fifty rounds they fought. Then Huyan executed a feint, broke away, struck his horse, and rode down the slope. Han, on racing steed, quickly followed.

Eight hoofs churned the turf like iron bowls. The chase continued for six or seven *li,* until the contestants were far from all the others. Han began closing the distance between them. Suddenly, Huyan turned his mount around, put up his lance and, brandishing his two rods, galloped to meet his

pursuer. They battled for a dozen rounds. Again Huyan parried the crescent-bladed halberd and rode away.

“He can't get near me with his lance,” thought Han Cunbao, “and can't beat me with his rods. I can take that thief alive! What am I waiting for!”

Han rapidly gave chase. But as he rounded a bend between two mountains, the path forked. Which direction had Huyan taken? He urged his steed up the slope and looked. He saw Huyan Zhuo riding off along a stream.

“Where do you think you're going, wretched robber,” bawled Han. “Dismount and be bound, and I'll spare your life!”

Huyan halted and cursed Han fulsomely. Han rode in a wide circuit so that he came up behind Two Rods and cut off his retreat. On one side was the mountain, on the other side the stream. Their field of combat was the narrow space between, and it was there they met. The horses had little room to maneuver.

“Surrender now,” called Huyan. “Why wait?”

“You're beaten already, and you want me to surrender!”

“I've lured you here because I want to capture you alive! That's your only hope for survival!”

“It's I who am going to capture you alive!”

The rage of the two men again flared. Han rained stabs against Huyan's chest and abdomen with his long halberd. Parrying left and right, Huyan countered with a whirlwind of thrusts from his lance.

For thirty more rounds they fought. As Han thrust at Huyan's ribs, Huyan lunged for Han's heart. Both dodged, and the weapons each went harmlessly by. But Huyan clapped the shaft of Han's halberd under his arm, and Han seized Huyan's lance with his hand. Both pulled and tugged with all their might from their saddles. The rear legs of Han's steed were in the stream. Huyan and his horse were dragged into the water.

The men struggled and wrenched, the horses kicked up spray till both combatants were drenched. Huyan abandoned his lance and, with Han's halberd still clamped under one arm, reached for his rods. At that moment, Han dropped Huyan's lance and grabbed his arms. Locked in combat, the two tumbled into the water. Their horses spurted up the bank and galloped towards the mountains.

Weaponless, the men wrestled in the stream. Their helmets fell off, their armor hung in pieces. In the deep water they traded kicks and punches, moving gradually back to the shallow edge of the stream.

While the battle was raging, a troop of cavalry arrived at the bank, headed by Featherless Arrow Zhang Qin. They seized Han Cunbao and sent men to recover the horses. Hearing the neighs of the cavalry steeds, the animals returned themselves. The armor and weapons were retrieved from the stream and given to Huyan Zhuo. He mounted, dripping wet. Han was also put on a horse, his hands tied behind his back, and all rode quickly for the gap.

Ahead, they saw coming towards them another body of cavalry, searching for Han Cunbao. Both troops halted. In the fore of the government forces were two commandants—Mei Zhan and Zhang Kai. When these observed the bound and dripping Han mounted on a steed, Mei Zhan grew very angry. Brandishing a three-pronged two-edged blade, he charged at Zhang Qin.

Before they had fought three rounds, Zhang Qin broke and galloped away. Mei Zhan followed. Zhang Qin unlimbered his ape-like arms, twisted his wolf-like waist, and let fly with a stone. It struck Mei Zhan on the temple, drawing fresh blood. The commandant dropped his sword and covered his face with his hands. Zhang Qin wheeled his mount around. Zhang Kai fitted an arrow to his bow, pulled it to the full, and sped the feathered shaft. Zhang Qin yanked up his horse's head, so that it took the arrow in the eye. As the beast fell to the ground its rider leaped clear and prepared to fight on foot.

But Zhang Qin's only real military skill lay in throwing stones. With the lance he was slow. Zhang Kai, after rescuing Mei Zhan, came after Zhang

Qin. The lance of the man on horseback darted like a thing bewitched. Zhang Qin defended himself as best he could, and when he could withstand no more, dashed for cover amid his own troop. Zhang Kai pursued, slaughtering horsemen left and right until he reached the site of Han Cunbao.

He was about to ride back with Han when he heard a clamor of wild yells. Two more cavalry troops were tearing through the mountain gap. One was led by Qin Ming the Thunderbolt, the other was headed by Big Halberd Guan Sheng, both chieftains riding fast and fierce. Zhang Kai, protecting Mei Zhan, departed hastily, abandoning their men. The cavalry cut in and again captured Han. Zhang Qin grabbed a riderless horse and mounted, but Huyan was exhausted and could only follow in the wake of the attackers. The impetus of the assault carried the men of Mount Liangshan to the fore of the government soldiers, and they harried them all the way back to Jizhou. There they ended the chase. They returned to the fortress with Han Cunbao that same night.

When Song Jiang, seated in Loyalty Hall with the other chieftains, saw the prisoner, he ordered his men to stand back and untied him personally. He invited Han to be seated at the head of the hall and treated him solicitously. Han was grateful beyond words. Song Jiang then asked Dang Shixiong to join them, and afforded Dang the same courteous treatment.

“You two generals may feel completely at ease,” he said. “We have no evil intentions. We've come here only because corrupt officials have forced us to do so. If the emperor grants us amnesty we'll be happy to serve the government.”

“But didn't Marshal Chen bring you an amnesty?” said Han. “Why didn't you take that opportunity to return to the path of righteousness?”

“Although it was an imperial amnesty, its terms were not clear. What's more, the emissaries had substituted a cheap rural brew for the imperial wine. My brothers were unconvinced. And that Majordomo Zhang and Captain Li dared to threaten and insult us!”

“Because no good person was in charge, a matter of importance to the state was delayed,” Han said regretfully.

Song Jiang feasted his guests. The next day he presented them with saddled horses and saw them off to the mouth of the valley. The two spoke highly of him all the way to Jinzhou. By the time they neared the city it was late. They did not enter until the following morning.

They went to Marshal Gao and told him how Song Jiang had released them. Gao grew very angry.

“It's a bandit trick to soften our army's resolve! How can you two have the effrontery to see me? Guards, take them out and kill them!”

Wang Huan and the other officials dropped to their knees and pleaded: “It's not their fault. The scheme is Song Jiang's and Wu Yong's. If you execute Han and Dang, the bandits will laugh at us.”

Gao finally let himself be persuaded. He rescinded his order, but he stripped both men of their ranks and directed them to report to the Military Procurate in the Eastern Capital for punishment. The two left under escort for the capital city.

Han Cunbao was the nephew of Han Zhongyan, a former premier. Many officials in the court had obtained their positions through him. One of these was Zheng Juzhong, originally a royal tutor, and now a censor in the court. Han Cunbao had great respect for him and told him about his problem. Zheng got into his sedan-chair and took Han to consult with Minister Yu Shen.

“We'll have to appeal to the prime minister,” said Yu, “then we can petition the emperor.”

He and Han went together to Premier Cai Jing and reported: “Song Jiang has no evil intentions. He's waiting only for an amnesty from the emperor.”

“He destroyed the previous decree. Men so lacking in courtesy cannot be amnestied, they can only be wiped out or arrested.”

“That was because the emissaries did not state the emperor's noble purpose and express his concern. They spoke harshly instead of kindly. For that reason the mission failed.”

Only then did the premier consent to help.

The following morning when the Taoist Emperor opened court, Cai Jing again proposed offering an amnesty to Song Jiang and his men if they surrendered.

“Marshal Gao has asked Wen Huanzhang of Anren Village to be chief of staff, and Wen has already reported to the court for duty,” said the emperor. “We shall send him as our emissary. If the brigands consent to submit, we will forgive their previous crimes. If not, we shall set a time limit within which we shall expect Marshal Gao to either exterminate them or bring them back to the capital as prisoners.”

Cai Jing drafted the appropriate decree and, at the same time, invited Wen to dine with him in his mansion. Wen was a famous scholar, well known to most of the high ministers in the imperial court. Each of them drank to him in greeting. After the banquet Wen returned to his quarters and packed for his journey. He bid farewell to the emperor and set out the same day.

Meanwhile, in Jizhou Gao fretted impatiently. The gatekeeper entered and announced: “Niu Bangxi is here.” Gao directed that he come in. Niu bowed respectfully and Gao asked: “What about the boats?”

“We confiscated along the way over fifteen hundred, large and small. They're all waiting below the lock.”

Very pleased, the marshal rewarded Niu. He ordered that the craft be congregated in a wide bay and grouped in threes. Each group was to be decked with planks and chained together at the stern, so as to carry the maximum number of infantry. The cavalry would escort them along the banks.

By the time the dispersement of troops was settled and the soldiers had become adapt at boarding the craft half a month had gone by. Mount

Liangshan already knew all about it.

Wu Yong instructed Liu Tang to strengthen defenses along the water courses. He told the naval chieftains to prepare small boats, nail iron plate to their prows, and fill their holds with brushwood sprinkled with sulphur and saltpetre. These would wait in the inlets.

He also ordered artillery expert Ling Zhen to place signal cannon on all the surrounding heights. Pennants were to be tied to tree-tops in the thickets along the river and gongs and drums and fireworks were to be readied there to create the impression that well-manned military encampments were at hand. Gongsun Sheng was asked to perform magic and raise the wind. The main forces would fight as three armies on the land.

Wu Yong's plan for the men of Mount Liangshan was completed.

In Jizhou, Marshal Gao hastened the departure of his contingents. His naval craft he placed under the leadership of Niu Bangxi, who again collaborated with Dragon Dream Liu and Dang Shiying as the three top commanders. Gao donned his armor, the drums thundered thrice and the boats in the bay set sail, while on land the cavalry swung into a trot. The craft sped forward like arrows, the horses seemed to fly, as the government troops pushed into Liangshan Marsh.

Gongs and drums beating, the naval vessels glided on, winding ever deeper into the marsh in an endless succession of masts. But not a single outlaw boat did they meet. As they neared the Shore of Golden Sands, they saw two fishing craft in a cove of lotus flowers. There were only two men on each, and they were clapping their hands and laughing uproariously.

Dragon Dream Liu, on the leading government vessel, ordered his archers to shoot. The fishermen dived into the river and swam underwater. Liu urged his flotilla on, and they gradually drew closer to the Shore of Golden Sands. A line of shady willows fringed the bank. Two brown oxen were tied to one of the trees, and three or four herd boys lay dozing on the grassy sward. In the distance a lad seated on the back of another ox was softly playing a flute.

Liu directed his assault squad to land first. The sleeping boys jumped up and, laughing merrily, disappeared into the willow grove. Six or seven hundred soldiers of the advance unit started clambering up the bank. A cannon boomed within the willows. On either side, war drums beat. A contingent in red armor, led by Qin Ming the Thunderbolt, burst into view on the left. On the right suddenly appeared a contingent in black armor, headed by Two Rods Huyan Zhuo. The two units, each comprised of five hundred men, swarmed towards the bank. By the time Dragon Dream Liu yelled for his troops to return to the boats he had already lost more than half.

Niu, hearing the agonized yells of the advance force, ordered his rear boats to pull back. But a string of cannon shots sounded on a hilltop and the reeds commenced to rustle. Gongsun Sheng, his long hair streaming down, his sword in hand, stood upon an astrological diagram on the summit, raising the wind. It moaned through the trees, gathering momentum, and pelted the soldiers with sand and stones and whipped up giant waves. Dark clouds enshrouded the earth, completely blocking out the sun. It was a wild, raging gale.

Dragon Dream Liu also hastily directed his vessels to retreat. From the criss-crossing inlets in the reeds and water lilies a number of small craft sped out and dispersed themselves amid the government flotilla. A drum sounded; and on each little boat torches were lit. This was in accordance with the plan Wu Yong had given to Liu Tang, whereby the naval chieftains would load the craft with dry reeds and brushwood sprinkled with oil, sulphur and saltpetre. In an instant, great flames were leaping skyward, and the small boats closed in on the larger vessels. Soon, from one end to the other, the entire government flotilla was ablaze.

Liu removed his helmet and armor and jumped into the water. Not daring to go near the shore, he headed for where the river was wide and deep, hoping thus to escape. A small craft, piloted by only one man, shot out of the reeds to intercept him. Liu flipped over and swam underwater. Someone seized him around the waist and hauled him to the boat, where he was dragged aboard. The man on the boat was Tong Wei the Dragon from the Cave. The one who had grabbed him was Li Jun the Turbulent River Dragon.

Meanwhile, Niu Bangxi, seeing all the government vessels in flames, also stripped off his armor and prepared to leap into the river. Suddenly, a man appeared on the prow holding a grappling hook. With this he snagged Niu and pulled him into the water backwards. The man was Zhang Heng the Boat Flame.

Corpses littered the waterways of Liangshan Marsh, their blood encrimsoning the waves. There were bashed and battered skulls without number. Dang Shiying, who was fleeing in a small craft, was killed by swarms of arrows from the reeds on both sides. Many of the soldiers could swim, and these escaped with their lives. Those who could not, died of drowning. Prisoners were escorted under guard to the fortress. Li Jun and Zhang Heng wee about to do the same with their captives Dragon Dream Liu and Niu Bangxi, but they were afraid Song Jiang would only let them go again. After talking it over, they killed the two by the roadside, cut off their heads and brought these to the mountain instead.

Meanwhile, Marshal Gao, leading his army as reinforcements to the water's edge, heard the continuous boom of cannon and the steady beat of drums. He guessed that the fighting was on the river, and he hastened forward, surveying both the banks and the nearby hills. He saw soldiers emerging from the water and crawling up the banks and running. Gao recognized one of the officers and asked him what had happened. The mail told how all the boats had been burned. He said he didn't know where the others were.

Gao's heart chilled with alarm. The yelling continued, and black smoke filled the sky. The marshal hastily led his troops back along the road they had come. Drums suddenly thundered on the hills ahead. A troop of horsemen burst forth and blocked their path. In the lead was Suo Chao the Urgent Vanguard, wielding a mountain-splitting battle-ax as he cantered towards them. At Gao's direction, Wang Huan, the commandant who was riding beside him, trotted out with levelled lance.

Before the two had fought five rounds, Suo Chao wheeled his mount and withdrew. Marshal Gao and his contingent pursued. But when they rounded the foot of a hill, Suo Chao had vanished. At that moment, they were attacked from behind by a troop led by Panther Head Lin Chong.

They suffered some casualties. They travelled another six or seven *li*, and a troop under Yang Zhi the Blue-Faced Beast caught up and inflicted further losses. After another eight or nine *li* Zhu Tong the Beautiful Beard harassed their rear, imposing still more casualties.

These were tactics devised by Wu Yong—not preventing retreat, but persistently raiding from behind. The battered government troops had no heart for battle. They wanted only to flee, and were incapable of protecting their rear.

Panic-stricken, Gao flew back to Jizhou. By the time he reached the city it was nearly midnight. Just then he saw flames rising from the fort in the outskirts and heard shouts of alarm. Shi Xiu and Yang Xiong plus five hundred foot soldiers lying in ambush had, with only a few torches, set the city ablaze, then slipped away.

Gao's soul leaped from his body in fright, and he hurriedly sent men to inquire. Only when they returned and reported: “They're gone,” did he relax. A count of his troops showed he had lost more than half.

As Gao sat deep in gloom, a scout from a far outpost entered and reported: “An imperial emissary is arriving.” Gao rode forth with his army and commandants to greet him. Wen Huanzhang, the emissary, told him of the proposed amnesty. When all the officers had been presented, they returned to headquarters in the city to confer. Gao ordered that a copy of the document be made.

The marshal had already suffered two heavy defeats and lost all his boats. If he delivered the amnesty now, he'd be ashamed to face people on his return to the capital. For several days he vacillated, unable to come to any decision.

It so happened that in Jizhou there was an old functionary named Wang Jin, a cruel, crafty fellow who was popularly known as “Cut Your Heart Out” Wang. He had been given to headquarters by Zhang Shuye, the prefect of Jizhou. Having read a copy of the amnesty, and learning that Gao was in a dilemma, Wang presented himself before the marshal.

“Your Excellency needn't worry about the amnesty,” he said. “I have a way to cope with that. The Hanlin scholar who has drafted the document is surely on good terms with Your Excellency, since he has left the rear door open.”

Gao was mystified. “What do you mean?”

“The most important part of the document is the line in the middle that reads: 'Obliterate Song Jiang, Lu Junyi and the other chieftains' crimes; we grant them amnesty.' This sentence is not clear. Have the copyist break it up into two sentences: 'Obliterate Song Jiang,' and 'Lu Junyi and the other chieftains' crimes, we grant them amnesty.' Then lure Song Jiang into the city, seize him as their leader, and execute him. Disband and scatter his followers. Since ancient times it has been said: 'A snake without a head cannot crawl, a bird without wings cannot fly.' Without Song Jiang, what good are the others! How does this strike Your Excellency?”

Gao was delighted. He immediately appointed Wang his chief advisor and told Chief of Staff Wen Huanzhang of the plan.

“An imperial emissary can act only in a righteous manner,” Wen protested. “We cannot indulge in such deception! If any of Song Jiang's followers should learn of this and expose us, it would be extremely awkward!”

“Nonsense,” cried Gao. '“The essence of military tactics is deception.' From the earliest days this has been the rule. There's no need to be so proper.”

“This is a decree from the emperor, and so will be believed by everyone throughout the land. The words of the emperor are precious as jade. They cannot be tampered with. If we were to do what you say, and later it should be found out, we'd have no credibility in the future.”

“We'll deal with the present, and worry about the future some other time,” said the marshal.

He dispatched a messenger to Mount Liangshan directing Song Jiang and his entire complement to come to the walls of Jizhou to hear an imperial decree granting them amnesty.

After having again defeated Marshal Gao in battle Song Jiang instructed his junior officers to collect the remains of the burned boats and use them for firewood. Those that had been unscathed were to be turned over to the water defense positions. Captured enemy generals should be allowed to go back, at intervals, to Jizhou.

Song Jiang and his chieftains were conferring in Loyalty Hall when an officer entered and reported: “A messenger has come from Jizhou Prefecture. He says: 'The imperial court his sent an emissary with a decree granting amnesty and conferring official posts. I have been dispatched to announce this good news.'”

On hearing these joyous tidings from on high, Song Jiang smiled all over his face. He summoned the messenger into the hall.

“The royal court has granted an amnesty,” the man said. “I have been sent by Marshal Gao to invite all of you chieftains to the walls of Jizhou for a ceremonial reading of the decree. We have no other intention. Please discard any doubts.”

Song Jiang said he would discuss the matter with his generals. He rewarded the messenger with silver and satins and directed him to return to Jizhou. Then he ordered his chieftains to prepare to go and hear the reading of the imperial document.

“Don't be so hasty, brother,” urged Lu Junyi. “Marshal Gao is probably up to something. You can't just rush into this!”

“If you men are always so suspicious, how will we ever return to the path of righteousness?” Song Jiang countered. “For better or worse, let's go.”

Wu Yong smiled. “We've beaten that rogue Gao so badly his gall is chilled and his heart is shattered. No matter how elaborate a scheme he may have, it won't work. Besides, we're all gallant warriors. There's no need to worry. Just go along with brother Song Jiang down the mountain. I'll send Black Whirlwind Li Kui on ahead first with Fan Rui, Bao Xu, Xiang Chong and Li Gun and a thousand infantry to he in ambush on the east road to Jizhou. I'll also send sister Ten Feet of Steel with Mistress Gu, Sun the Witch,

Stumpy Tiger Wang, Sun Xin and Zhang Qing and a thousand cavalry to he in ambush on the west road to Jizhou. If they hear a series of cannon shots they will charge to our rescue at the North Gate."

After Wu Yong's arrangements were carried out, the chieftains descended the slope. Only the naval commanders remained to guard the fortress.

And so, Marshal Gao, refusing to heed the advice of Chief of Staff Wen, lured the heroes from their stronghold. Who would have thought that this would convert the outskirts of Jizhou and the fringes of Liangshan Marsh to battlefields. The resulting melee was like wolves among a pack of dogs, tigers amid a flock of sheep. Truly, that single imperial decree stirred up the passions of the entire band of warriors.

How did the gallants wreak havoc in Jizhou? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 80
Zhang Shun Drills Holes Through the Paddle-Wheel Boats
Song Jiang Defeats Marshal Gao the Third Time

Marshal Gao, seated in his headquarters in Jizhou, summoned Wang Huan and his other commandants into conference. He ordered them to strike camp and move with their contingents into the city. All were to remain on the alert and fully armed. No flags were to be displayed on the city walls, except above the North Gate, where an imperial yellow banner would be unfurled bearing the words: *The Emperor's Edict.* Gao, the emissary and the high officials then mounted the wall and awaited the arrival of Song Jiang.

From the mountain fortress Zhang Qin the Featherless Arrow set forth with an advance cavalry unit of five hundred, made a circuit of the city, and headed north. Then the Marvellous Traveller Dai Zong arrived and scouted on foot. This was reported to Marshal Gao, and he went personally to the ramparts of the outer wall, accompanied by a retinue of over a hundred. Flags were set up. An incense table was placed in the foreground.

Song Jiang's army could be seen approaching far to the north. First came trumpeters and drummers and many flagbearers, then the chieftains —in scoop and circle and “V” formations. On horseback, the foremost of these —Song Jiang, Lu Junyi the Magnate, Wu Yong and Gongsun Sheng, bowed from their saddles and hailed Marshal Gao.

On Gao's instructions an officer shouted from the wall-top: “The imperial court has deigned to pardon your crimes and has sent a special decree. Why do you come in armor?”

Song Jiang sent Dai Zong to the foot of the wall with the reply: “We have not yet heard the gracious statement and don't know what it contains. We therefore dare not come unprotected. If Marshal Gao will summon all the residents of the city and let them hear the decree with us together, we will then remove our armor.”

Gao issued the appropriate order and, before long, all the citizens of Jizhou were assembled. Only then did Song Jiang and his chieftains advance. To a flourish of drums and trumpets, they dismounted. At a second flourish, they approached the city wall on foot. Behind, junior officers, leading the chieftains' horses, halted an arrow-shot away and assembled in neat ranks. At a third flourish, the chieftains stood with hands respectfully clasped and prepared to hear the decree. From atop the wall, the emissary read:

Edict: Each man's character is unique, a state has only one essential morality. People who behave well are proper citizens, those who do evil are rebels. For the latter, no good fate lies in store. We can only pity them. We bear that for a long time a band has congregated on Mount Liangshan, unresponsive to kindly exhortations to restore goodness to their hearts. We dispatch our emissary with this decree: Obliterate Song Jiang... Lu Junyi and the other chieftains' crimes, we grant them amnesty. Let the leaders report to the capital to give thanks, let their followers return home. Reject not the imperial decision. Let the emperor's benevolence expunge wickedness and restore righteousness to your hearts. Oppose not Heaven's will to replace the old with the new. Let this decree be proclaimed for all to know.

The Xuan He Period

Year—month—day—

When the words “Obliterate Song Jiang” were read out, Wu Yong said to Hua Rong: “Did you hear that?”

The moment the reading was completed, Hua Rong shouted: “Since you won't amnesty our Big Brother, why should we surrender!” He notched an arrow to his bow, pulled it to the full, and yelled at the emissary: “Take a look at Hua Rong's magic arrow!”

The feathered shaft struck the emissary between the eyes. Government officers tried urgently to save him, while the gallant outlaws below cried: “Down with them!” and loosed a volley of arrows at the men atop the city wall. Marshal Gao hurriedly took cover.

All four gates of the city opened, spewing out Jizhou troops. Drums pounded in the midst of Song Jiang's coterie. The outlaws mounted then-horses and withdrew. The municipal forces pursued them five or six *li,* then started back. Behind them cannon thundered and Li Kui came charging from the east with brigand infantry, while from the west Ten Feet of Steel led her cavalry in an attack. Both arms of the pincers closed in together.

Fearing an ambush, the government troops quickly withdrew into the city. Song Jiang and his unit then turned around and charged, so that the local Jizhou contingents were being attacked from three sides. Thrown into great confusion, they were slaughtered by the score as they fled towards the city. Song Jiang and his men did not pursue for long, but returned to Liangshan Marsh.

Gao wrote a report to the emperor stating that Song Jiang's bandits had killed the emissary and refused to submit to the royal decree. He sent in addition a personal letter to Prime Minister Cai, Chancellor Tong and Marshal Yang urging them to confer, and requesting the prime minister to

petition the throne for immediate reinforcements for use against the brigands, and the right to requisition fodder along the way.

On receipt of Gao's letter, the premier obtained an audience with the emperor and told him what had transpired. The sovereign's face clouded.

“Those bandits have insulted the throne! They've rebelled against us repeatedly!” He ordered each of his armies to provide reinforcements, and to take their orders from Marshal Gao.

Marshal Yang, who already knew of the consecutive defeats, selected two generals from the Imperial Divisions. He also directed that five hundred crack infantry from each of the four camps at Dragon Fierce, Winged Tiger, Sun Lift, and Loyal Righteousness be mustered, totalling two thousand men, to go with the generals in aid of Gao against the brigands.

Who were these two generals? The first was Qiu Yue, Chief Arms Instructor of the Imperial Guards and Commander of the Left Echelon Protecting the Royal Person. The second was the Deputy Chief Arms Instructor of the Imperial Guards and Commander of the Right Echelon Protecting the Royal Person, Cavalry General Zhou Ang. Both men had been decorated many times for valor, were famed for their skill with arms, and enjoyed high prestige in the capital. Moreover, they were completely trusted by Marshal Gao.

Marshal Yang ordered them to depart immediately, and they went to take their leave of the prime minister. “Be prudent and win distinction soon, and we surely will raise you to more important posts,” Cai said. The two generals thanked him.

From the four camps they chose, one by one, tall, stalwart men who were narrow of waist and broad of shoulder, superb specimens from the provinces of Shandong and Hebei who could climb mountains and swim rivers. Then they took their leave of Marshal Yang and various high officials, and announced they were departing the next day. The marshal presented them each with five excellent horses for their personal use in battle. He promised them a big send-off. The generals thanked him and went to their respective commands to prepare.

The following morning the troops, geared up for the march, assembled in front of Imperial Divisions headquarters. Qiu Yue and Zhou Ang divided them into four contingents. The thousand soldiers from Dragon Fierce and Winged Tiger, plus more than two thousand cavalry, were under Qiu Yue. Zhou Ang commanded the thousand from Sun Lift and Loyal Righteousness, in addition to another two thousand some-odd cavalry. Still another thousand foot soldiers were split into two follow-up support units.

By the time the sun was brightening the troops were formed in ranks. Marshal Yang examined them personally from the tower above the city gate. The junior officers looked imposing, the soldiers bold, as they stood behind their embroidered banners. And when, from amid the troops of cavalry, General Qiu Yue suddenly rode proudly forth to lead the column on the left, the capital's citizenry broke into cheers.

The men of Sun Lift and Loyal Righteousness stood also in smart formation, each contingent behind its embroidered banner. General Zhou Ang cantered forward from the midst of his assembled horsemen, stern and fierce, to lead his right column to the edge of the city.

There, he and Qiu Yue dismounted, bowed to Marshal Yang and bid farewell to the officials. Leaving the Eastern Capital, they set out with their troops for Jizhou.

In the city of Jizhou, Marshal Gao and Chief of Staff Wen conferred. They decided that, while waiting for the reinforcements to arrive, they would dispatch men to the surrounding hills to fell timber. They would obtain boat builders from nearby counties, set up a shipyard outside Jizhou, and construct vessels of war. They would also enlist bold fellows to serve as sailors.

It happened that a man named Ye Chun, a boat builder from Sizhou Prefecture, was living in one of the inns. On his way to Shandong he had passed Liangshan Marsh and had been waylaid and robbed by some of the petty bandits. Unable to afford the journey home, he now hung around the city. When he heard that Gao was felling timber for war craft to invade the marsh, he sketched a couple of vessels and went to call on him.

After courtesies had been exchanged, Ye said: “Why did the last naval expedition fail? Because your boats were simply confiscated from here and there, and used wind and oar power, neither of which are reliable. What's more, they were small, low-lying and narrow, so that it was difficult for their crews to use weapons.

“According to my plan, if you want to defeat the bandits you must build a few hundred big warships. The largest of these should be the type known as the Big Paddle-Wheeler. It has twelve paddle-wheels on each side and holds several hundred men. Twelve men turn each of the wheels. A bamboo screen along the gunwales wards off arrows. On deck will be towers for archers, and to these winches and pulleys will be attached.

“One rap on a bamboo segment in the ramparts of the bridge will be the signal to advance. All twenty-four paddle-wheels will immediately begin to rotate, and the boat will fly forward. The outlaws have no craft that can stop it. And when all our archers fire together, they'll never be able to block our arrows.

“The second type of vessel you need is known as the Small Paddle-Wheeler. It has a total of twelve wheels and holds a hundred or more men. A long spike protrudes from both its prow and its stern. It also has archer towers on each side and is also protected by a bamboo screen. This craft can be used in the narrower waterways of the marsh to prevent those rogues from laying ambushes. If you accept my plan, the bandits of Mount Liangshan will soon be subdued.”

As Gao listened and examined the sketches, he was very pleased. He called for wine and food and clothing and rewarded Ye Chun. Gao put him in charge of the boat building project.

Gao pushed the men day and night, setting time limits within which to deliver the timber to Jizhou. Each county had to supply materials needed for the vessels' construction. Any man who was two days late in fulfilling his duties received forty strokes. If he was three days late, he got double. If he exceeded five days, he was executed according to military law. The pressure never let up. Many ordinary citizens were killed, and the people bemoaned their lot. A jingle going around ran like this:

A frog in a well can't see the whole sky,

Gao has taken advice from a jerk.

Paddle-wheelers won't win him victory,

A waste of money and exhausting work.

Sailors to be added to the fleet kept arriving in Jizhou, and Gao assigned them to the commandants of his various camps for training. Then one day the city gate-keeper announced: “Qiu Yue and Zhou Ang, the generals sent by the imperial court, are here.” Gao directed his commandants to go outside the wall to greet them. When the two were ushered into his presence, Gao received them with food and wine. He entertained them and instructed an officer to reward their troops. The generals requested Gao's order to sally forth and do battle.

“Wait a few days, gentlemen, till the paddle-wheelers are ready,” said Gao. “Then we can proceed on land and water together. With our combined naval and cavalry operation, we'll suppress the bandits in a single battle!”

“It will be child's play,” boasted the generals. “Rest assured, Marshal? we surely will return to the capital victorious!”

“If you match your words with deeds, I shall petition the emperor to have you both promoted to important posts.”

The feasting ended, the generals mounted their horses in front of Gao's headquarters and returned to their commands. They settled their troops in encampments and awaited orders.

When Song Jiang and his chieftains hurried back to Mount Liangshan after their rebellious outcry and murderous battle at the walls of Jizhou, Song Jiang was anxious. “Twice they've come with amnesties, and both times we injured the emissary,” he said to Wu Yong. “That makes our crimes more

serious than ever. What are we going to do? The court will surely dispatch an army to punish us."

He sent a scout down to find out what was happening and report back as soon as possible. In a few days the man returned with the details. Song Jiang and Wu Yong conferred in Loyalty Hall. They knew now that Gao had raised a navy, and that he had put Ye Chun in charge of building a fleet of hundreds of paddle-wheelers, large and small. Also that the Eastern Capital had dispatched reinforcements under Qiu Yue and Zhou Ang, both courageous generals.

"How can we stop ships that size when they come flying across the water?" said Song Jiang.

Wu Yong laughed. "What is there to be afraid of? All we need is a few naval chieftains. We have powerful warrior leaders to fight them on land. Anyhow, it will take them several weeks to build those big vessels. We've forty or fifty days yet. Send a couple of brothers down to get into their shipyard and stir them up a bit. Meanwhile, we'll gradually be thinking of a way to cope."

"Excellent. I'll tell Flea on a Drum Shi Qian and Golden Dog Duan Jingzhu to go."

"Better ask Zhang Qing and Sun Xin to disguise themselves as timber haulers and mix with the others and get into the yard also. And tell their wives Mistress Gu and Sun the Witch to dress up like the women food servers and go in with them. Flea on a Drum and Golden Dog can be their support."

Each of the pairs was summoned to the hall and instructed what to do. All were inordinately pleased and went separately down the mountains to carry out their missions.

Marshal Gao continued driving the boat builders day and night and conscripting people into his labor force. The entire area east of Jizhou was one vast shipyard. The several thousand artisans building the hundreds of

large craft complained bitterly about conditions. But the rough soldiers threatened them with their swords, and forced them to work without rest.

Flea on a Drum and Golden Dog reached the shipyard first. “Since the other four will be setting fire to this place, you and I won't be making much of a show here,” Flea said to Dog. “Let's just lay low till that happens. Then I'll wait outside the city gate. Troops are sure to be sent out. I can slip in when they open the gate, climb up to the wall tower, and set it to the torch. You, meanwhile, can be kindling a nice blaze in the fodder depot west of the city. They won't know where to rush first. We'll give them a good scare.”

The two concealed incendiary powders on their persons, and separated to find safe resting places.

Zhang Qing and Sun Xin, on nearing Jizhou, saw four or five hundred men hauling lumber to the shipyard. They joined them and also laid their shoulders to the ropes. At the entrance to the yard over two hundred soldiers, each with a dagger at his waist, belabored the straining porters with sticks to greater speed.

Inside there was much confused activity. They whole area was enclosed by a large palisade and contained two or three hundred thatch-roofed work-sheds. Thousands of artisans were busily engaged. In one section men were sawing planks, in another carpenters were nailing them to the hulls, in a third others were caulking the cracks. Laborers without number were bustling about. Zhang and Sun drifted into dark corners of the kitchen-shed and kept out of sight.

Their wives, Sun the Witch and Mistress Gu, wearing soiled clothes and each carrying a jug of cooked rice, entered with other women noisily delivering food. Gradually, day waned and a bright moon rose. But most of the artisans went on working at their never-ending tasks.

Around the second watch Sun and Zhang set fire to the left side of the yard, while their wives started a blaze on the right. The thatched roofs burst quickly into flames. Yelling in alarm, the artisans and laborers knocked down the palisade and fled into the night.

Marshal Gao, who was sleeping, was aroused by a man hastening in and reporting: “The shipyard is on fire!” Gao got up quickly and ordered his army to the rescue. Qiu Yue and Zhou Ang, leading a contingent of municipal troops, hurried from the city to quench the blaze. Shortly thereafter flames began to dance on the wall tower. Gao mounted his horse and led troops personally up the wall. As they were fighting the fire another report came in: “The fodder depot to the west is in flames! The blaze has turned the sky as bright as day!”

Qiu and Zhou, by then rushing with their forces to the fodder depot, heard suddenly the thunder of drums and a chorus of murderous yells. Featherless Arrow Zhang Qin and five hundred cavalry, who had been hiding there in ambush, now dashed out, with Zhang heading directly for the two generals.

“Mount Liangshan's whole complement of heroes are here!” Featherless Arrow shouted.

Qiu Yue, angered, clapped his horse and waved his sword, and galloped towards Zhang Qin, who met his charge with levelled lance. Less than three rounds they fought, and Featherless Arrow turned and left. Eager to win glory, Qiu pursued. “Halt, bandit!” he cried.

Zhang socketed his lance and quietly drew a stone from his embroidered pouch. Twisting around, he waited till Qiu drew near, then let fly with a shout: “Here!”

The stone struck Qiu in the face, knocking him from his horse. Zhou Ang and several standard bearers tore pell-mell to the rescue. While Zhou engaged Featherless Arrow, the others got Qiu back into his saddle. Zhou and Zhang fought only a few rounds, when Zhang departed. Zhou did not pursue, and Zhang again returned. He saw approaching the four contingents under Wang Huan, Xu Jing, Yang Wen and Li Congji. Zhang waved his hand as a signal and led off his five hundred cavalry.

Fearing an ambush, the government troops did not give chase. They reassembled and went back to fighting the fires. The sky was already light by the time they extinguished the three blazes. Gao dispatched an officer to learn the state of Qiu's wound. The stone had hit him in the mouth,

dislodging four of his teeth and lacerating his nose and lips. The marshal directed a doctor to treat him.

Qiu's injury intensified Gao's antipathy for the men of Liangshan Marsh. He hated them to the marrow of his bones. He sent an order to Ye Chun to hasten the construction of the boats, and instructed his commandants to set up camps around the perimeter of the yard and stay constantly on the alert.

Zhang Qing, Sun Xin and their wives were delighted. Flea on a Drum and Golden Dog returned. All six were met by cohorts who had come down to escort them back to the mountain fortress. On arriving in Loyalty Hall they told how they had set the fires. Song Jiang was very pleased. He gave a feast in their honor and handsomely rewarded them. Thereafter, he sent spies down frequently.

By the time the boats were built it was winter. But that year was warm. Marshal Gao was glad. He felt Heaven was helping him. He urged his naval officers to familiarize themselves with the use of the vessels, which were being launched one after another. Sailors, conscripted from all the surrounding areas, now numbered over ten thousand. One half was put to learning to propel the craft, the other half practised archery. In less than twenty days the necessary preparations were completed. Ye Chun invited Gao to inspect the fleet.

On the appointed day Gao arrived with his generals and commandants. More than three hundred paddle-wheelers lay in their moorings. A dozen or so were selected and decked with pennants, to the crash of gongs and the beat of drums. At a knock on the bamboo segment, the wheels on both sides of the vessels began to churn, and they skimmed forward at truly flying speed. Gao's heart warmed with joy.

“The bandits will never be able to stop boats as fast as these,” he exulted. “We're sure to win!”

He rewarded Ye Chun with money and silks. He also paid the artisans travelling expenses and let them go home.

The next day Marshal Gao directed that fruits and animals and paper replicas of gold and silver ingots be prepared for a sacrifice to the Water Spirit. The generals formed ranks and invited Gao to light the incense. Qiu Yue, whose wounds had healed, was consumed by hatred. He longed only for a chance to capture Zhang Qin alive and wreak his vengeance. With Zhou Ang and the commandants he mounted and rode behind Gao to where the boats were moored. There, all dismounted and Gao conducted the sacrifice. After the incense was lit and the ceremonies completed, the paper money was burned and the generals offered their congratulations.

Gao directed that the singers and dancers who had been brought from the capital come on board and entertain, while the sailors practised propelling the large craft flying across the waters. The sound of music and revelry continued until well after dark. That night all slept on board.

The next day, and the day after there was more feasting and drinking. Still, the vessels did not sail. Suddenly a scout arrived and reported: “The Mount Liangshan bandits have written a poem and posted it in front of the City God Temple in Jizhou. Here is a copy.” The poem ran as follows:

We'll capture Yang Jian and old Gao Qiu,

And mop up the prefectures on the Central Plain.

Even if your paddle-wheelers number ten thousand,

You won't leave Liangshan Marsh alive again!

Gao was furious. He wanted to set forth at once. “If I don't kill all those bandit rebels, I won't come back!” he raged.

“Cool your wrath, Marshal,” Chief to Staff Wen urged. “I think they're actually afraid. That's why they bluster. It doesn't matter. Wait a few days. Decide exactly how you're going to use your troops on land and on water,

then start. There's still time. Though it's already winter, the weather is warm. It's a blessing from Heaven, a sign of your prestige."

This kind of talk pleased Gao, and he went into the city to discuss troop movements. Zhou Ang and Wang Huan would lead a large army to follow along on land and give support to the navy. Xiang Yuanzhen and Zhang Kai would go with a force of ten thousand and block the large road in front of Mount Liangshan. The marsh had always been a place of mist and reeds and wild inlets. The road had been built, on Song Jiang's orders, only recently. Gao wanted to get his men in there first, and cut the connection with the mountain fortress. His Chief of Staff Wen, his other generals, his Chief Advisor Wang Jin, the boat builder Ye Chun, his standard bearers, his senior and junior officers, would all travel with Gao in the armada.

Wen objected. "You should supervise the cavalry advance on land, Marshal. Don't go with the fleet. It's too dangerous."

"There's nothing to worry about, retorted Gao. "The last two times not only didn't we capture any of the bandit leaders, but we took heavy casualties and lost many of our boats. This time we've got excellent craft. If I don't assume personal command how are we going to nab those rebels! We're going to fight them to the death! You need say no more."

The chief of staff dared not pursue the subject. He followed the marshal on board. Gao designated thirty large paddle-wheelers, with Qiu Yue, Xu Jing and Mei Zhan in command, as the van. Fifty small paddle-wheelers under Yang Wen, Chief Advisor Wang Jin and Ye Chun the boat builder, would go first to clear the way. A big red pennant on the lead craft bore the inscription in words of gold: *We roil the seas, stir the rivers and churn up white waves to pacify the country and suppress the torrent-causing demons.*

On a vessel in the central section of the fleet were Gao, Wen, and the boy singers and girl dancers. Green standards, generals' flags, pennants of yellow and white, and canopies of red and black broke out on all the boats, and arms were displayed in the central section. Vessels under Wang Wente and Li Congji brought up the rear.

It was the middle of the eleventh lunar month. The cavalry was given the order to march. Qiu Yue, Xu Jing and Mei Zhan, on the lead craft in the van of the armada, set sail. Like flying clouds and rolling mist, the government forces advanced on Liangshan Marsh.

The three generals in the van urged on their vessels, dispatching the small paddle-wheelers to both sides of the river to block the inlets, while the large paddle-wheelers proceeded full speed ahead. Eyes bulging, necks straining, the officers stared before them, as the craft wound swiftly deeper into the marsh.

Song Jiang and Wu Yong, who had been informed in detail about the enemy movements, had made careful preparations, and awaited the arrival of the government boats.

Gao's fleet could see in the distance a few small vessels approaching, each carrying fourteen or fifteen men dressed in armor. A captain sat in the middle of each craft, and on each was a white banner reading: *The Three Ruan Heroes of Liangshan Marsh.* Ruan the Second was on the boat in the center, Ruan the Fifth to his left, and Ruan the Seventh to his right. What appeared in the distance to be shining armor was actually only gold and silver paper.

The three vanguard generals shouted for the lead craft to open fire, and cannon balls, musket shots and rockets spewed forth. The three brothers and their crews waited fearlessly till the paddle-wheeler drew close enough to bring them within range, then, with a shout, dived into the river and swam away under water. Qiu Yue and his cohorts captured only three empty boats.

Before the fleet had proceeded another three *li,* three more skiffs were seen swiftly approaching. On the first were a dozen or so men, their bodies daubed with pigments of black, yellow and red. Their long hair hung unbound, and they whistled as they came. On the other two craft were six or seven men, and these were streaked red and yellow. Meng Kang the Jade Flagpole commanded the central vessel. Tong Wei the Dragon from the Cave commanded the boat to the left, Tong Meng the River Churning Clam captained the craft to the right.

Qiu Yue ordered his lead vessel to fire. With a shout, the painted figures dived into the river. Again the government forces took possession of only three abandoned vessels.

After proceeding another three or more *li* the van of the armada saw three medium-sized boats, propelled by eight men on each plying four oars. A dozen brigands, grouped around a captain who was seated in the prow of one of the vessels unfurled a red banner reading: *Naval Chieftain Li Jun the Turbulent River Dragon.*

On the craft to the left sat a captain holding an iron spear. Here, a green banner read: *Naval Chieftain Zhang Heng the Boat Flame.*

A bold figure stood on the craft to the right. Stripped to the waist and barefoot, he had several iron chisels tucked into his belt. In his hand was a bronze hammer. A black banner inscribed in silver read: *Chieftain Zhang Shun the White Streak in the Waves.*

“Thanks for delivering your boats to the marsh!” Zhang called.

The three vanguard generals shouted for their archers to shoot. Simultaneously with the twanging of the bowstrings, the men on the three craft somersaulted into the river.

It was early winter. None of the soldier and sailor conscripts on the government vessels cared to enter the icy water. While they hesitated, a volley of shots sounded from the signal cannon on the heights. Hundreds of little craft sped out from reeds on all sides like swarms of locusts. On each of these were four or five men and an unspecified cargo. The big paddle-wheelers tried unsuccessfully to ram them.

Obstructions, shoved in beneath the water, suddenly stopped the paddle-wheels from turning. Arrows shot from the archery towers were warded off by the men on the little craft with board shields.

They closed in on the big ships, caught their tillers with grappling hooks, hacked at the sailors at the wheels. Fifty or sixty brigands were already

clambering up the lead ship. The frantic officers wanted to withdraw, but their retreat was cut off.

As the van vessels fought a confused battle, wild yells rose in the rear of the armada. Marshal Gao and Chief of Staff Wen, hearing the panic from their position in the center of the fleet, hurriedly sought to go ashore. A clamor of trumpets and drums shook the reeds. The soldiers on Gao's ship yelled: “We're leaking!” and jumped into the river.

Before and behind, all the paddle-wheelers were shipping water. Gao could see them sinking, while the little craft engulfed them like ants.

The government vessels were brand-new. How could they leak? Zhang Shun and a team of expert sailors had swum underwater with hammers and chisels and knocked holes in the bottoms, so that they were leaking like sieves.

Gao mounted the tiller deck in the stern and yelled for help to the boat behind. A figure spurted out of the river and leaped on the tiller deck. “I'll save you, Marshal,” the man exclaimed. Gao stared. He had never seen him before.

The man strode forward. With one hand he grabbed Gao's head kerchief, with the other he grasped his belt. “Down you go,” cried the swimmer. He tossed the Marshal into the river with a splash. How the mighty had fallen!

Two little craft came flying over, and Gao was hauled on board one. His captor was White Streak in the Waves Zhang Shun. In the water Zhang could take a man as easily as catching a turtle in a jar. He had only to extend his hand.

When the fleet was thrown into confusion, Qiu Yue, on the lead vessel, was anxious to escape. Suddenly, a naval officer emerged from among the outlaw sailors who had boarded the ship. Before Qiu could defend himself, the man bounded up to him and hacked him down with one sweep of his blade. The swordsman was Yang Lin the Elegant Panther. Xu Jing and Mei Zhan saw Qiu Yue die, and rushed to fight Yang Lin.

Four more lesser chieftains advanced on the generals: Zheng Tianshou the Fair- Faced Gentleman, Xue Yong the Sick Tiger, Li Zhong the Tiger-Fighting General, and Cao Zheng the Demon Carver. All came charging up from the rear.

It was too much. Xu Jing jumped overboard. To his surprise, someone was waiting for him beneath the waves, and he was taken.

Mei Zhan was stabbed in the thigh by Xue Yong, and fell into the hold. Eight chieftains were leading the outlaw naval forces. Three of these were still on their first boat. Li Yun the Black-Eyed Tiger, Tang Long the Golden-Coin Spotted Leopard, and Du Xing the Demon Face. Even if those government commandants had three heads and six arms apiece, they could never have got away. Song Jiang was in control of the Liangshan Marsh naval contingents. Lu Junyi the Magnate commanded the outlaw warriors on land.

At the time of the complete victory on the waterways, Lu was leading his army in an advance along the main road in front of Mount Liangshan. They ran into the government forces under Zhou Ang and Wang Huan.

Zhou Ang rode to the fore and shouted: “Rebellious bandit, do you recognize me?”

“You worthless officer,” Lu yelled back. “Your death is before your eyes and you still don't know it!” He levelled his lance and galloped towards his foe.

Zhou Ang gave his mount full rein and raced to meet him, brandishing his battle-ax. They clashed on the road before the mountain.

Less than twenty rounds they fought, with neither the victor, when cries arose from the rear of the government troops. Outlaw forces, which had been lying in ambush in the forests on both sides of the road, had come charging out and were assailing the soldiers from all directions. Led by Guan Sheng and Qin Ming in the southeast, and by Lin Chong and Huyan Zhuo in the northeast, the brigand heroes closed in rapidly.

Commandants Xiang Yuanzhen and Zhang Kai couldn't stop them. They fought their way free and ran for their lives. Zhou Ang and Wang Huan dared not remain and give battle. Trailing their weapons, they turned their steeds and followed after the fleeing generals to the safety of Jizhou City. There, they quartered their troops and awaited further news.

After winning the naval engagement and capturing Gao Qiu, Song Jiang directed Dai Zong to transmit his urgent order: none of the prisoners were to be harmed. Chief of Staff Wen and the other officials still on the big paddle-wheelers, plus the singing boys and dancing girls and the rest of their company, were removed from the vessels. Then, trumpet calls signalled the outlaw forces to retire to the fortress with their captives.

Song Jiang, Wu Yong and Gongsun Sheng were in Loyalty Hall when Zhang Shun brought in the dripping Gao Qiu. Song Jiang hurried forward to meet him. He had fresh clothes of silks and satins brought for Gao to change into. Then he escorted the marshal to the interior of the hall and begged him to be seated in the central place of honor.

Dropping to his knees and murmuring that he deserved to die for his crimes, Song Jiang kowtowed. Gao hastily returned the courtesy. Song Jiang directed Wu Yong and Gongsun to help the marshal to his feet, and once again beseeched him to be seated. He instructed Yan Qing to transmit the order: “Whosoever, after today, kills any person shall be severely punished according to our military law.”

One by one, the outlaw chieftains brought in their prisoners. Tong Wei and Tong Meng with Xu Jing; Li Jun and Zhang Heng with Wang Wente; Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu with Yang Wen; the three Ruan brothers with Li Congji; Zheng Tianshou, Xue Yong, Li Zhong and Cao Zheng with Mei Zhan; Yang Lin with the head of Qiu Yue; Li Yun, Tang Long and Du Xing with the heads of Ye Chun and Wang Jin; Xie Zhen and Xie Bao with Chief of Staff Wen, plus the singing boys and dancing girls and the entire theatrical company. Only four had escaped: Zhou Ang, Wang Huan, Xiang Yuanzhen and Zhang Kai.

Song Jiang directed that fresh clothes be provided to all, and that they be permitted to clean up a bit. He then invited everyone into the hall, and

asked them be seated according to rank. He directed that the captured soldiers be allowed to return to Jizhou. For the singing boys and dancing girls and their company he provided a good boat, and told them to go back on their own.

Song Jiang ordered that cows and horses be slaughtered and that a feast be laid. To the strains of joyous music he rewarded his troops and, summoning his chieftains, presented them to Marshal Gao. He repeatedly toasted his guest, while Wu Yong and Gongsun kept their cups filled and Lu Junyi the Magnate and the others stood in attendance.

“I'm only a petty functionary with the tattoo of a criminal upon my face. I would never dare oppose our holy emperor,” Song Jiang exclaimed. “I was forced to come here because of my many heavy offenses. Although I was twice approached with the emperor's benevolent forgiveness, the missions were perverted and corrupt. It's a long complicated story. Rescue me, Marshal, from the depths of the pit and let me see the sun again! Your kindness will be engraved upon my bones! I will pay for it with my very life!”

Gao looked around at the assembled gallants. Bold and heroic, intelligent and imposing, each and every one was handsomely dressed. Although they were no longer on the battle field, he was still half afraid of them, and he said: “Rest assured, Song Jiang. When I return to the court I will petition the emperor for a full amnesty. You will be pardoned and rewarded with an important post. Your warriors, high and low, will also enjoy the emperor's favor and become respectable officials.”

Overjoyed, Song Jiang bowed and thanked the marshal. In the banquet that followed, although elegant dishes were lacking, there were mountains of meat and seas of wine. All of the chieftains, by turns, respectfully toasted their eminent guest of honor.

Gao's tongue was loosened by drunkenness, and he boasted: “I've been a wrestler since childhood. I'm the world's best.”

Lu Junyi, also drunk, was irritated by Gao's bragging. He pointed at Yan Qing and said: “This young brother also knows how to wrestle. He won the

East Sacred Mountain competitions three times.”

Gao lumbered to his feet, took off his robe, and demanded that Yan wrestle with him. Because Song Jiang had been treating Gao respectfully as a marshal of the imperial court, the chieftains had tolerated his vainglorious talk. Now they saw his challenge to Yan Qing as a good chance to shut his mouth. They stood up.

“Good, good,” they said. “Let's have the match.” They swarmed noisily out of the hall.

Song Jiang was also in his cups. His mind was fuzzy. When the two contenders removed their outer garments and walked to the broad open porch, he ordered that a soft rug be put down.

The two struck poses, then Gao lunged. But Yan Qing's hands were swifter. He grabbed Gao and, with one twist, threw him so hard on his back that Gao lay stunned for several minutes, unable to rise. This grip is known as the life-saver. Song Jiang and Lu Junyi hurriedly raised Gao to his feet and helped him put on his clothes.

“You're a little drunk, Marshal,” they said, smiling. “How can you wrestle in this condition? Please don't be offended.”

Badly shaken, Gao returned to the banquet. He drank until far into the night, when he was assisted to quarters in the rear of the hall.

The next day, Song Jiang gave another banquet to soothe Gao after his shock of the previous night. The marshal announced he wished to leave.

“I have no intention of detaining Your Excellency,” Song Jiang assured him. “May Heaven strike me dead if I'm deceiving you!”

“If, mighty warrior, you permit me to return to the capital, I and my whole family will be your guarantors before the throne. An amnesty will surely be granted and you will be given an important position. If I go back on my word, may I have no cover under Heaven and no hiding place on Earth and may I die pierced by spears and arrows!”

Song Jiang kowtowed in thanks.

“You may keep my generals here as hostage if you don't believe me.

“There's no need. How could I doubt a high noble like you? I'll have mounts prepared for them and send them back to their camps.”

“We're grateful for your considerate treatment. And now I must go.”

Song Jiang and his chieftains begged Gao to remain a bit longer. The next day they again feasted and talked until late, but on the third day the marshal insisted that he must leave. Song Jiang gave him a final farewell banquet.

“Send one of your more intelligent men along,” Gao suggested. “He can accompany me when I petition the emperor and relate your circumstances here on Mount Liangshan. Then an imperial decree can be issued quickly.”

Song Jiang wanted nothing more than an amnesty. After conferring with Wu Yong, he selected Xiao Rang the Master Hand for the mission.

“Better send Yue Ho the Iron Throat, too,” Wu Yong recommended. “Let them both go.”

“Although you trust me, warrior,” said Marshal Gao, “I would like to leave Chief of Staff Wen here as a token of my word.”

Song Jiang was very pleased. On the fourth day, he and Wu Yong and about twenty horsemen accompanied Gao and his commandants down the mountain and saw them off all the way to the Shore of Golden Sands, a distance of over twenty *li.* They bid the marshal farewell and returned to the fortress. From then on they watched for an emissary and listened for good tidings.

News of Gao's return preceded him, and Zhou Ang, Wang Huan, Xiang Yuanzhen, Zhang Kai, and Prefect Zhang Shuye came out of the city to greet him. After entering Jizhou, the marshal remained for several days. He instructed the local commandants to lead their troops back to camp to rest and await orders. Then, with General Zhou Ang, plus senior and junior

officers, he set out for the Eastern Capital with his army, accompanied by Xiao Rang and Yue Ho. Prefect Zhang Shuye returned to Jizhou, where he maintained strict security precautions.

And because Gao took with him two representatives from Liangshan Marsh, gallant men met their sovereign in the ornate palace, bravos were entertained by high officials and lofty nobles. Their courage was sung at lavish banquets, they were conspicuous heroes amid the fiercest of generals.

On returning to the capital how did Gao stand as guarantor for Song Jiang and his cohorts when he petitioned for their amnesty? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 81
At Night Yan Qing Meets the Emperor By a Trick
Dai Zong Rescues Xiao Rang

On Mount Liangshan the chieftains conferred. “I wonder what Gao Qiu will do,” mused Song Jiang.

Wu Yong laughed. “He's a beady-eyed, slippery character, the kind who'll turn on you in a flash. He lost so many troops and wasted so much of the government's money and grain, when he gets back to the capital he's sure to claim that he's ill. He'll make some vague report to the emperor and order his army to rest. Xiao Rang and Yue Ho he'll keep under house arrest. So far as an amnesty is concerned, you're just hoping in vain.”

“That's terrible! We won't get the amnesty, and we're harming two of our men besides.”

“Pick two more clever fellows and send them to the capital with money and jewellery. Have them inquire what's going on and find a connection who can convey our wishes to the emperor. Then Gao Qiu won't be able to squirm out of it. That would be the best plan.”

Yan Qing came forward. “Before we raised such a rumpus in the Eastern Capital last time, we managed to get acquainted with Li Shishi. I imagine she guessed pretty well what we're after. Since she's the emperor's mistress,

of course he didn't suspect her of having anything to do with us. She probably simply said that we had found out where he went for his private pleasures and deliberately tried to frighten him. The incident was closed. Let me go to her again with money and jewellery. Pillow talk is the quickest way to get word to the emperor. It will be easy. One way or another, I'll persuade her."

"All right," said Song Jiang. "But you may run into danger."

"Let me go along and help," Dai Zong proposed.

"When we attacked Huazhou, you did a favor to Marshal Su," Zhu Wu the Miraculous Strategist reminded Song Jiang. "He's a good-hearted person. If he intervenes with the emperor for us, it will help a lot."

Song Jiang summoned Chief of Staff Wen and invited him to be seated. "Do you know Marshal Su Yuanjing?" Song Jiang queried.

"We were students together," Wen replied. "The emperor never goes a step without him. Su is extremely virtuous and generous, a kindly, amiable person."

"Frankly, we doubt whether Gao Qiu will really request the emperor for an amnesty when he returns to the capital. I met Marshal Su once when he was burning incense in Huazhou. I'd like to beg him to petition for us."

"If that's what you want, General, I'll write a letter which you can have delivered."

Pleased, Song Jiang called for paper and pen. At the same time, he lit fine incense, brought out the Heavenly Books of the Mystic Maid, prayed to Heaven, and cast bamboo prediction slips which revealed an extremely favorable omen. Then he drank with Dai Zong and Yan Qing to their successful journey.

Two large hampers were packed with gold and jewellery and silks, and the letter was concealed on the person of the emissaries, who bore also forged

identity documents from the Kaifeng prefectural government. Both were disguised as bailiffs.

They took their leave, crossed at the Shore of the Golden Sands and headed for the Eastern Capital. Dai Zong carried an umbrella and wore a pack upon his back. Yan Qing, his bailiff's staff on his shoulder, toted the hampers, one at either end. His black gown was tucked up in front, a pouch hung at his waist. Puttees bound his legs to the knees, his feet were shod in hempen sandals. Except for pauses to eat or drink, the two halted only to sleep at night, pushing on again at dawn.

After many a day, they arrived at the Eastern Capital. Instead of going in directly, they circled round to the Wanshou Gate. A guard halted them. Yan Qing set down the hampers.

“What are you stopping us for?” he demanded in a countrified accent.

“Orders from headquarters. Men from Mount Liangshan may try to slip in with the crowds. At every gate all travellers must be questioned.”

“You certainly know your duty,” Yan Qing snickered, “questioning your own people! We have some business to do in Kaifeng Prefecture. I don't know how many thousands of times we've gone through this gate! You question us and turn a blind eye to the Mount Liangshan men strolling by right under your nose!”

He pulled out the forged documents and shoved them in the guard's face. “Can you recognize Kaifeng identity papers?”

The officer in charge of the gate shouted at the guard: “They've got Kaifeng papers. What are you questioning them for? Let them in!”

Yan Qing snatched back the documents, shoved them inside his gown, picked up the hampers and walked on. Dai Zong, with a cold laugh, followed.

They proceeded to the neighborhood in front of the Kaifeng government compound, sought out an inn, and retired.

The next day Yan Qing changed into a cloth gown, tied at the waist by a sash, and wore a hat at a rakish angle in the manner of a young idler. He took from the hamper a packet of gold and jewellery.

“I'm going to see Li Shishi, brother,” he told Dai Zong. “If anything goes wrong hurry back to the stronghold.”

Yan Qing proceeded to the courtesan's home. The carved railings were still there, and the green windows and vermilion doors had been repainted, prettier than before. He pushed aside the door curtain of spotted bamboo and entered.

The fragrance of incense greeted him. Pictures and calligraphy by famous artists had again been hung in the parlor; beneath the eaves were twenty or thirty trays of curiously shaped stones and miniature pines. Brocaded cushions were piled on couches of carved sandlewood.

Yan Qing coughed softly. A maid emerged, then informed the courtesan's “mama” that they had a caller. The bawd was startled to see him.

“What are you doing here again?”

“Please ask the lady to come out. I have something to say.”

“The last time you called you got us into trouble and wrecked the house. If you've anything to say, say it.”

“My words are for the lady's ears only.”

Li Shishi, who had been listening outside the window, now entered. She was a lovely sight, her cheeks as rosy as dew-drenched apples, her waist as supple as a willow swaying in the breeze, a veritable Heavenly Maid, more beautiful than a Moon Fairy. Her skirt swirled as she glided lightly into the room.

Yan Qing stood up, placed the packet on the table, kowtowed four times before “Mama” Li, then twice before Leading Courtesan Li.

“You're too courteous,” Shishi protested. “You shouldn't honor one so young.”

Yan Qing rose and said: “Last time we gave you a fright. We've been uneasy ever since.”

“Don't deceive me,” exclaimed the girl. “You said you were Zhang Xian and that the other two were merchants from Shandong, and you created a terrible riot! Luckily, I was able to cajole the emperor. If it were anyone else but me, she and her whole establishment would have been ruined!”

“There were a couple of lines in that poem your magnate wrote which I wondered about:

Six time six in wild goose formation,

Plus eight times nine,

Waiting only for news

From the Golden Cock

I was about to question him, when the emperor arrived unexpectedly. Then the rumpus started, and I had no chance. Now that you're here, you can explain. Don't try to fool me. Tell me the truth. I won't be satisfied till you clear things up!”

“I'll tell it to you straight, but please don't be alarmed, Queen of Courtesans. That short swarthy fellow who sat at the head of the table was none other than Song Jiang the Defender of Justice. In the second seat, the fair-complexioned man with the mustache and goatee was the Small Whirlwind Chai Jin, descendant of Emperor Chai Shizong. The man dressed as a bailiff who stood opposite was Dai Zong the Miraculous Traveller. The one at the door who fought with Marshal Yang was Li Kui the Black Whirlwind. I

myself am from Darning Prefecture, the Northern Capital. Everyone call me Yan Qing the Prodigy."

"Big Brother Song Jiang came to the capital to see you, and sent me first, disguised as Zhang Xian, to arrange it. He wasn't seeking to buy your smiles and charms, but wanted rather to reveal to you our story because he knows you're close to the emperor. We hope you'll tell His Majesty of our desire to act on Heaven's behalf, defend our country and preserve peace for the people. An early amnesty will prevent a further loss of lives. If our monarch will grant such a decree, you, my lady, will be the chief benefactor of the thousands of men on Mount Liangshan. Due to the interference of corrupt ministers, the true situation has been kept from the emperor. And so, we seek this path. We have no intention to frighten you, my lady. Big Brother has no proper gift to offer, only these small trinkets. He begs that you don't laugh at them, and accept."

Yan Qing opened the packet and spread upon the table gold and jewellery and precious plates. The bawd, who loved riches, was enchanted. She urged Shishi to accept, and led Yan Qing to a small private room and begged him to be seated. She served him fine delicacies and waited on him solicitously. Since no one knew when the emperor was likely to drop in, none of the young lords and rich young gentlemen ever dared to venture to the courtesans' house for tea. Li Shishi waited on Yan Qing personally.

"I'm a condemned criminal," he protested. "How dare I sit at the same table with the leading courtesan in the land?"

"Don't talk like that," exclaimed the girl. "You're a famous warrior. It's only because no good person has been able to speak up on behalf of you men that you've had to bury yourselves in the marsh."

"The first amnesty, which Marshal Chen brought, had no reassuring words, and he substituted cheap drink for the imperial wine. The second amnesty was phrased in such a way that it could be interpreted as excluding Song Jiang and Lu Junyi. For that reason, we didn't surrender. Next, Minister Tong came with an army, and we demolished them in two engagements. Finally, Marshal Gao mobilized thousands of people and built a great fleet and attacked. In three battles we wiped out more than half his forces. The

marshal himself was captured and taken to our stronghold. Brother Song Jiang not only didn't kill him, but treated him royally and sent him back to the capital. All the prisoners were also let go. When he was on Mount Liangshan the marshal swore a great oath that he would petition the emperor for our amnesty. We dispatched two of our men with him—Xiao Rang the Master Hand and Yue Ho the Iron Throat. But it looks like the marshal has them confined in his residency and won't let them out. He'll never admit to the emperor that his losses were so heavy."

The girl agreed. "He wasted money and grain and the lives of his officers and men. He wouldn't dare tell the emperor the truth. I heard all about it. Let's have a few cups together and discuss this thing."

"I'm a very poor drinker."

"You've had a long, hard journey. Here you can relax. We'll drink some wine and then decide what to do."

Yan Qing couldn't get out of it. He had to match the courtesan cup for cup.

Li Shishi had made her start in life as a prostitute. She was a temperamental girl, and when she saw that Yan Qing was a fine figure of a man and an eloquent speaker she took an immediate liking to him. As they drank, she began dropping hints, which grew increasingly provocative. Yan Qing was a clever fellow, and he understood perfectly. But he was a dedicated warrior, determined to put through Song Jiang's grand plan. How could he respond?

"I've heard you're an excellent musician, brother," said the courtesan. "I'd love to hear you play."

"I have studied music a bit," Yan Qing admitted. "But I wouldn't have the nerve to perform in your presence, my lady."

"I'll play first, then, and you listen."

Shishi directed a maid to bring her flute. She took the instrument from its brocaded bag and blew softly. Truly a lovely sound, soaring into the clouds

and seeping into the rocks.

Yan Qing was lavish in his praise. When Shishi had finished she handed him the flute.

“Now play something for me.”

Yan Qing wanted to win her esteem. He accepted the instrument and performed with all his skill. The girl was enchanted.

“I didn't realize you were such a talented flutist!”

She took up a lute and played a little tune. The notes lingered in the air like a chorus of jade chimes, like a duet of orioles.

Yan Qing bowed his thanks and said: “I'll sing a song for your amusement, my lady.” He had a beautiful voice, and he enunciated the lyrics clearly. At the conclusion of his song, he bowed again.

The girl raised her cup and drank to him. She thanked him in her most seductive tones. With lowered head, he murmured an acknowledgment. After a few more drinks, the courtesan addressed him with a smile.

“I hear that your body is artistically tattooed. Would you let me have a look?”

Yan Qing laughed. “It's true I have a few decorations. But how dare I disrobe in my lady's presence?”

“With a gallant gentleman like you, who worries about such things?”

At her insistent pleas, Yan Qing finally removed his robe. Shishi was delighted. She ran her jade fingers over the designs. The young man hastily put his robe on again.

Again she drank with him. Her suggestiveness was quite open now. Yan Qing was afraid she'd make a move he'd find hard to repel. Suddenly, he had an idea.

“How old is my lady this year?” he asked.

“I'll be twenty-seven.”

“I'm two years younger, twenty-five. Since you're kind enough to give me your affection, I'd like to acknowledge you as my foster big sister.”

Yan Qing dropped to his knees. Like pushing a golden mountain, like a toppling jade pillar, he kowtowed eight times.

This stymied the girl's wicked inclinations and enabled the grand plan to go forward. Anyone else so beguiled with drink and sexual allure would have brushed the grand plan aside. But Yan Qing had a will of iron. He was a real man!

Then Yan Qing asked “Mama” Li to come in, and he kowtowed to her too, and acknowledged her as his foster mother.

“Stay here with us,” said Shishi. “There's no need to live at an inn.”

“That's very kind of you. I'll go get my things.”

“Don't keep me waiting, now!”

“The inn's not far. I'll be right back.”

Yan Qing took his leave, went to the inn, and related to Dai Zong what had happened.

“Excellent,” said the Miraculous Traveller. “I'm only afraid she'll arouse you and you won't be able to control yourself.”

“A man who can be diverted by drink or sex when he's out on a mission is no better than a beast! May I die beneath ten thousand sword cuts if I let that happen to me!”

Dai Zong laughed. “We're both men of honor. No need to swear.”

“But there is. You surely doubt me.”

“Just go quickly. At a propitious time push the thing through and hurry back. Don't make me wait too long. We have to deliver that letter to Marshal Su.”

Yan Qing packed some odd bits of gold and jewellery and silks and returned to Shishi's house. He gave half to “Mama” Li and distributed the rest among the servants and attendants. They all were very pleased. Quarters were prepared for him in a room adjacent to the parlor, and he moved in. Everyone fondly addressed him as “Young Uncle.”

By fortunate coincidence that evening a man came and said: “The emperor is coming tonight.” On hearing this, Yan Qing went to Li Shishi.

“Do me a favor, sister,” he pleaded. “Arrange for me to meet the emperor so that I may request his imperial pardon in writing for my crimes. You'll be conferring a blessing.”

“I can do that. Move him with your eloquence. I've no doubt he'll grant it.”

Gradually, darkness fell. The moon was hazy, the air was filled with the fragrance of flowers and the musky scent of orchids. Accompanied by a young eunuch, the sovereign arrived through the secret tunnel at the rear door of the courtesan's house. He was dressed in the white garb of a scholar. Seating himself in the anteroom, he directed that the front and rear gates be locked and the lamps and candles brightly lit. Li Shishi, formally dressed and coifed, presented herself before his majesty. She curtsied, and they exchanged courtesies.

“Put on something more comfortable and entertain me,” said the emperor.

Shishi did so, and led the monarch into her chamber. A table had already been laid with delicacies. The courtesan lifted her cup and urged him to drink.

“Come, beloved,” he said happily, “sit beside me.” He was obviously in a good mood.

“A cousin of mine, who has been wandering around, just arrived today,” said Shishi. “He longs to see Your Majesty, but dares not present himself. He's asked me to make the request.”

“Since he's your cousin, why not?”

The courtesan summoned Yan Qing. He dropped to his knees and kowtowed. The emperor was pleased by his handsome appearance. Shishi directed Yan Qing to entertain the sovereign with some flute music while he was drinking his wine. After a while she played the lute, then she told Yan Qing to sing. The young man again kowtowed before the monarch.

“I only know some naughty tunes, which I wouldn't dare sing!”

“Exactly what I need to cheer me,” said the emperor. “I'm here privately in this house of pleasure. Go right ahead.”

Yan Qing took up a pair of ivory clapper sticks, bowed again to the sovereign, and said to Shishi: “If I go off key, sister, please correct me.” He cleared his throat and, keeping time with the clappers, sang:

No news from him

Since he left our village,

Constant longing

Tears at my heart.

The swallows are gone,

The flowers fade,

In just one spring

My waist grows thin.

Faithless lover,

When will he return?

It would have been better

If we never had met!

In dreams we're together,

But then I awake,

Outside my window

Orioles sing in the dawn.

Yan Qing was in excellent voice, and the emperor, delighted, bade him sing again. The young man kowtowed.

“I have another tune that's rather special.”

“Good. Let's hear it.” With feeling, Yan Qing sang:

Hear my plea, hear my plea,

Who knows how I've wandered,

Who knows!

In Heaven and on Earth

The innocent oft are wronged,

In the Fiery Pit, 'tis said,

Are hearts that are loyal and true,

Loyal and true!

Surely the day will come

When great benevolence

Will be by men repaid!

“What's the meaning of this song?” asked the startled monarch.

Weeping bitterly, Yan Qing prostrated himself on the ground. The emperor was puzzled.

“If you'll tell me what's troubling you, perhaps I can find a solution.”

“I've committed towering crimes! I dare not address my sovereign!”

“I forgive you. You may speak freely.”

“All my life I've been a wanderer. While travelling with merchants in Shandong and passing by Liangshan Marsh, we were captured and taken to the bandit Stronghold. There I stayed for three full years. Only recently did I escape and return to the capital. Although I've seen Cousin Shishi, I dare not walk the streets for fear that someone will recognize me and report me to the police. How would I be able to explain?”

“He's been miserable,” Li Shishi added. “You must help him, Your Majesty!”

“That's easy,” the emperor laughed. “No one would dare molest the young cousin of Leading Courtesan Li.”

Yan Qing gave the girl a significant glance. Shishi pouted and said to the monarch: “All I want is your written pardon. Then my cousin won't have to worry.”

“How can I write it? I don't have my royal seal here.”

“A pardon in your own hand is better than any document with a seal. Save my cousin! You'll be doing me a great favor!”

Unable to resist her blandishments, the sovereign called for pen and paper. “Mama” Li brought the writing materials from the study and Yan Qing ground the ink stick on the writing slab. The girl handed the emperor the ivory brush-pen with purple bristles. In a flourishing script he commenced to write on the imperial yellow paper, then paused.

“I'm afraid I've forgotten your name.”

“I'm called Yan Qing.”

“Ah.” The emperor wrote: *Xuan Ho the Taoist Sovereign does hereby pardon Yan Qing of all crimes.* Let no official arrest or question him. At the bottom, he signed his name.

Yan Qing respectfully received the document and kowtowed. Shishi raised her cup and drank her thanks.

“Since you've been in Liangshan Marsh, you must know the situation there,” said the monarch.

“Song Jiang and his band have *Act in Heaven's Behalf* written on their banner and their hall is called *Loyalty Hall.* They never attack a government seat or harm the people. They kill only corrupt and slanderous officials. They long for an early amnesty so that they can devote themselves to serving our country.”

“But I sent them amnesties twice. Why did they reject them and refuse to surrender?”

“The first one contained no words of comfort, and the emissary substituted cheap local brew for the imperial wine. The second was read in a manner that excluded Song Jiang. The brigands suspected a trick, and that changed everything. Minister Tong led an army against them, but after two engagements only a few escaped with their lives. Marshal Gao organized a huge civilian force to build ships of war, and attacked, but he didn't gain so

much as a broken arrow. In three engagements the bandits slaughtered his men and cut his army in two and captured the marshal. He vowed he would get them an amnesty, and they let him go, sending two of their men with him and keeping Chief of Staff Wen as hostage.”

The emperor sighed. “I knew nothing of any of this. Tong Guan said his troops couldn't stand the summer heat; that's why they returned. Gao said he had come back to the capital temporarily because he was ill.”

“Although you are a wise sovereign,” said Shishi, “you live deep inside the palace. How can you know when dishonest ministers conceal the truth?”

Again the monarch sighed. It was growing late. Yan Qing took his pardon, kowtowed and withdrew. The emperor and Shishi went to bed, where they revelled in intimate union.

The monarch left with the waiting young eunuch before dawn. Yan Qing got up and, on the excuse that he had some matters to attend to early in the morning, went back to the inn. He told Dai Zong everything that had been said, word for word.

“It's developing very well,” said the Miraculous Traveller. “Now, let's deliver the letter to Marshal Su.”

“After we've eaten.”

The two had breakfast, filled a hamper with gold and jewellery and silks, took the letter, and headed for Marshal Su's residency. They asked one of the neighbors whether he was home.

“The marshal hasn't returned from the palace yet,” they were told.

“Why not?” said Yan Qing. “There are no audiences in session at this hour.”

“He's our sovereign's closest companion. The emperor never goes a step without him. He may come home early, he may come home late. It's hard to say.”

“There's the marshal now,” someone exclaimed.

Very pleased, Yan Qing said to Dai Zong: “Brother, wait for me outside the residency. I'm going to speak to him.”

Approaching was a sedan-chair carried by porters in brocaded garments and ornate hats. Yan Qing knelt in its path.

“I have a letter to present to the marshal,” he called.

Su looked at him. “Come with me,” he directed. Yan Qing followed the sedan-chair into the residency compound. It halted before a large hall. The marshal got down, entered an adjoining study and seated himself. He ordered Yan Qing to come in.

“On whose business are you?”

“I've come from Shandong with a letter from Chief of Staff Wen.”

“Which Chief of Staff Wen?”

Yan Qing presented the letter. The marshal looked at the envelope.

“I couldn't imagine who it was! Why, it's Wen Huanzhang, my childhood schoolmate!” he opened the letter and read:

With hands washed clean, kowtowing a hundred times, I write this missive to the Respected Marshal. It's thirty years since I played in your home as a child. Recently, Marshal Gao appointed me Chief of Staff of his army. Unfortunately, he wouldn't heed my advice, and was defeated three times in succession. I'm ashamed to mention it. We both were captured and bound. But Song Jiang, in his benevolence, would not permit us to be harmed.

With Xiao Rang and Yue Ho—two men from Mount Liangshan, the marshals has now returned to the capital, promising to seek an amnesty. I have been left as hostage. I pray that you urge the emperor to pardon the crimes of Song Jiang and his cohorts, and let them make recompense through meritorious deeds. This will benefit not only our country, but the entire world! Your credit will resound through the ages!

Rescue me and allow me to live! I anxiously await your reply and trust you will understand.

In deepest gratitude, respectfully, Wen Huanzhang

The __ day of the first month, spring,

of the fourth year of the Xuan He Period

Marshal Su was astounded. “Who are you?” he demanded.

“Yan Qing the Prodigy from Liangshan Marsh.” The young brigand went out for the hamper and brought it into the study. “I waited on you several times when you were burning incense in Huazhou, Marshal. How could you have forgotten? Brother Song Jiang sends you these paltry gifts as a small token of his esteem. He prays every day that you will save us. His sole desire is that the marshal will obtain our amnesty. If you can persuade the emperor to grant one, you will be the great benefactor of the thousands of men on Mount Liangshan. The time for my mission is limited. I must go back now.”

Yan Qing kowtowed and left the residency. Marshal Su directed that the gifts be put away. He already had an idea.

Dai Zong and the Prodigy returned to the inn and Yan Qing said: “The first two parts of our mission succeeded pretty well. But Xiao Rang and Yue Ho are still detained in Gao's residency. How are we going to get them out?”

“We'll dress as bailiffs again and wait in front of Gao's place. When some officer comes out, we'll bribe him to let us see them. Once we've made contact, we'll decide what to do.”

The two disguised themselves, took some money, and proceeded towards Taiping Bridge. At the gate of the residency they kept watch. Soon, a young captain came swaggering forth. Yan Qing approached him and bowed.

“Who are you?” the captain demanded brusquely.

“Shall we go to the tea-house where we can talk?”

Dai Zong was waiting in a private room, and the three sat down together and had tea. Yan Qing spoke.

“I'll come to the point. Marshal Gao brought two men back with him from Mount Liangshan. One is called Yue Ho. He's relative of this brother here, and I'd like to see him. So we're asking your assistance.”

“I don't want to hear it! I don't know anything about what goes on in there!”

Dai Zong took from his sleeve a large silver ingot and placed it on the table. “There's no need for him to leave the residency,” he said. “Just let us speak to him and you can have this ingot.”

Stirred by the sight of the silver, the captain admitted: “Those two are there, all right. But the marshal has ordered that they must remain in the rear garden. If I let him out to talk to you, you must keep your word and give me the ingot.”

“Naturally,” said Dai Zong.

The officer hurriedly went back to the residency, while Yan Qing and Dai Zong waited in the tea-house. In less than half a watch, he returned, all in a flurry.

“First give me the silver. I've got Yue Ho in one of the side buildings.”

Dai Zong whispered something in Yao Qing's ear and handed the captain the ingot. Yan Qing went with the officer to the side building and saw Yue Ho.

“Talk quickly, you two, then go,” said the captain.

“I'm here with Dai Zong,” Yan Qing said to Yue Ho softly. “We're planning to rescue you and Xiao Rang.”

“They've got us in the rear garden. The wall is high and they've hidden the ladders. How are you going to do it?”

“Is there a tree anywhere near the wall?”

“There are large willows all along one side.”

“Tonight, listen for a cough. We'll be outside and throw over the ends of two ropes. Tie them to the willows, and we'll pull our ends tight. Then you and Xiao Rang climb over. At the fourth watch. Don't be late.”

“What are you so gabby about?” the captain called. “Go back inside and be quick about it!”

Yue Ho returned to the garden and quietly informed Xiao Rang. Yan Qing swiftly reported to Dai Zong. All waited for night to fall.

On the street Yan Qing and Dai Zong bought two thick lengths of rope and concealed them under their robes. They wandered to the rear of the residency to get the lay of the land. They found a stream and two empty boats moored not far from the bank. They hid in these craft until they heard the watchman's drum sound four times.

The two went ashore, circled round to the rear wall, and coughed. From within they heard an answering cough. Both sides were ready. Yao Qing threw over the rope ends. Giving them time to be secured, he and Dai Zong pulled their ends tight.

Yue Ho was the first to climb out, and he was followed by Xiao Rang. When both had slid down, they tossed the ropes into the garden. The four hid themselves in the boats until daybreak. Then they proceeded to the inn and knocked on the door. They packed their luggage, cooked and ate breakfast, paid the bill and left. As soon as the city gate was opened, they swarmed through and headed for Mount Liangshan to report their news. And if those four hadn't returned to the stronghold, would Marshal Su have petitioned the throne and obtained a full amnesty for Song Jiang and his men? Truly, when a high official reads a royal edict, heroes kneel before the

imperial presence. How did Marshal Su appeal to the emperor? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 82
The Mount Liangshan Fortress Distributes Its Wealth
Song Jiang and All of His Men Are Amnestied

When Yan Qing didn't return that night, Li Shishi became suspicious. Marshal Gao's trusted subordinate, delivering breakfast to Xiao Rang and Yue Ho the next day, found the room empty. He hurriedly informed the chief steward. The steward searched the garden, and discovered the two ropes tied to the willow. The captives had escaped. He had no choice but to report to the marshal. Gao Qiu's gloom deepened at this startling news. He secluded himself in his residency, claiming he was ill.

The following day the Taoist Sovereign held court at the fifth watch and received the homage of his officials. He seated himself on the throne in the Hall of Culture and Virtue.

“Are the civil and military officials all assembled?' he asked.

“They await outside the hall, each in his respective group, civil on the left, military on the right,” replied the chief of ceremonies.

The emperor ordered that the curtain be rolled up and that Tong Guan, Chancellor of Military Affairs, come forward.

“That punitive expedition of a hundred thousand troops you led personally against Liangshan Marsh, was it victorious or defeated?” queried the sovereign.

Tong Guan knelt and replied: “It wasn't that I didn't do my utmost! But it was the height of summer, and the soldiers weren't used to the surroundings and the climate. Many fell ill. Two or three out of ten died. With our forces dwindling, all I could do was bring them home for further training. Unfortunately on the way back more than half died of heat prostration. Your Majesty directed the bandits to surrender but, filled with false pride, they haughtily refused. Then Gao Qiu went after them with a naval armada, but he sickened and had to return.”

“Inept, treacherous minister! Your failure to tell the truth has caused our nation great damage. How is it that in only two engagements the bandits utterly demolished the imperial forces! And that rascal Gao Qiu, after wasting who knows how much of the province's money and grain, not only lost many ships and a considerable number of troops, but was personally captured and taken to the bandits' mountain stronghold! Instead of killing him, Song Jiang and his lieutenants treated him courteously and let him go. Our royal orders were disgraced and made a laughing stock!

“I have heard that Song Jiang and his men neither attack local governments nor harm the people. They seek only an amnesty so that they can serve the country. Officials like you, who are jealous of the talents of others and deliberately conceal the facts, are the lowest of vermin! A fine Chancellor of Military Affairs! You should be ashamed! I ought to have you executed to appease the indignation of the people, but I'll spare you for the time being!”

The emperor shouted at Tong Guan to fall back. Silently, the chancellor withdrew to a side. The sovereign addressed his Hanlin Academy scholars.

“Prepare my personal imperial decree, and send it with a high official, ordering Song Jiang and his men to return from Mount Liangshan.”

Marshal Su Yuanjing came forward and knelt before the throne. “Although I have no talent, I would be glad to go.”

The sovereign was very pleased. “I'll write the document myself,” he exclaimed. He ordered that a table be brought and the paper be spread.

After penning the decree, he called for the imperial seal and impressed it on the document. He directed the Keeper of the Royal Stores to draw thirty-six gold slabs and seventy-two slabs of silver, thirty-six bolts of red satin and seventy-two bolts of green satin, plus one hundred and eight bottles of yellow-sealed imperial wine, and entrust them to the marshal. He also gave Su twenty-four bolts of cloth for coats and linings and a banner proclaiming the imperial amnesty in letters of gold, and ordered him to set forth on the morrow.

The marshal took his leave of the emperor and left the Hall of Culture and Virtue. Court concluded, the officials withdrew, and Chancellor of Military Affairs Tong Guan slunk back to his residence in disgrace. He dared not attend any more royal audiences, and feigned illness. When Marshal Gao heard what had happened, he was terrified. He too was afraid to appear before the sovereign.

Marshal Su had the imperial wine and other gifts packed and shouldered by porters. Mounting his horse, he left the city. Officials saw him and his entourage out of the Nanxun Gate. The party proceeded towards Jizhou, flying the imperial banner with its inscription of gold.

Meanwhile, Yan Qing, Dai Zong, Xiao Rang and Yue Ho returned through the night to the stronghold and reported to Song Jiang and the other chieftains. Yan Qing showed them the pardon the emperor had personally written by hand.

“Good news is sure to come,” said Wu Yong.

Song Jiang burned fine incense, brought out the Heavenly books given him by the Mystic Maid of Ninth Heaven, and raised his head and prayed. When he cast the divining sticks they revealed an extremely lucky omen.

“We're sure to succeed,” cried Song Jiang. He requested Dai Zong and Yan Qing to go once more to the city, check on developments and report back immediately, so that adequate preparations could be made. A few days later, the two returned. “The emperor has entrusted Marshal Su with his royal decree,” they said. “The marshal is also bringing imperial wine, gold and silver slabs, satin of red and green, and cloth for coats and linings. He's on his way to proclaim the amnesty and will be here soon.”

Song Jiang was overjoyed. From Loyalty Hall he busily issued a series of orders: Men were to set up twenty-four shelters along the road from Liangshan Marsh to Jizhou, all decorated with bunting and filled with musical instruments. There, musicians—hired from neighboring shires — would play to welcome the procession. A lesser chieftain was to be in charge of each of the shelters. Others were sent out to buy fruit and sea delicacies and wine and tidbits to serve as snacks.

Marshal Su and his entourage, winding their way towards Mount Liangshan with the amnesty, reached Jizhou. Prefect Zhang Shuye came out to welcome them, and settled them in the hostel for officials. Politely, he raised his cup of greeting.

“Twice before the royal court sent amnesties. It was a serious loss to the country that they were not effectuated because their delivery was entrusted to the wrong persons. This mission of yours, Marshal, will surely be of great benefit.”

“His Majesty has recently learned that the band on Mount Liangshan are interested primarily in righteousness. They neither raid the prefectures nor harm good people. They stress acting in Heaven's behalf. And so His Majesty has dispatched me with his hand-written decree, plus gifts of thirty-six slabs of gold, seventy-two slabs of silver, thirty-six bolts of red satin, seventy-two bolts of green satin, a hundred and eight bottles of yellow-sealed imperial wine, and twenty-four bolts of cloth for coats and linings, to deliver an amnesty. Do you think the gifts too trifling?”

“It's not a question of gifts with these people. They want to serve the nation faithfully so as to earn fame for their posterity. If only you'd been able to come earlier, Marshal, our country wouldn't have had to suffer such heavy losses in officers and soldiers, money and grain. Once these warriors return to the fold they certainly will perform meritorious deeds for the emperor.”

“Can I trouble you to go to the fortress, Prefect, and tell them to prepare to receive my mission? I will wait here.”

“Of course.”

The governor mounted his horse and left the city with a dozen men. At the foot of the mountain he was met by lesser chieftains, who at once reported the news to the stronghold Song Jiang hastened down and escorted Prefect Zhang to Loyalty Hall.

“Congratulations,” Zhang exclaimed. “The emperor has dispatched Marshal Su with his personally hand-written amnesty, together with valuable gifts.

The marshal is already at Jizhou. Prepare, warrior, to welcome the imperial decree."

Pressing his fingers to his brow in a gesture of delight, Song Jiang said: "He is bringing us new life!" He begged Zhang to dine with him.

"I'd love to," said the prefect, "but the marshal would be annoyed if I were slow in getting back."

"At least have a drink, and accept these paltry things—I can hardly call them gifts." Song Jiang presented gold and silver on a platter.

"I wouldn't dare."

"A mere trifle, why refuse? Not nearly enough to express our thanks, but do take them as a small token of appreciation. Once the mission is completed, we shall offer something more substantial."

"I'm deeply grateful for your good intentions. But please keep them here, for now. I can always call for them later."

Prefect Zhang was absolutely incorruptible. He made strict demands upon himself.

Song Jiang directed his generals Wu Yong and Zhu Wu, plus Xiao Rang and Yue Ho, to escort Prefect Zhang to Jizhou, and there see Marshal Su. On the day after the morrow all chieftains, big and small, would wait to greet the emissary thirty *li* from the fortress.

Wu Yong and the others travelled through the night to return the prefect to Jizhou, and called on the marshal the next morning at the hostel for officials. They kowtowed and remained kneeling before him. Su directed them to rise and be seated. Deferentially, the four replied they wouldn't dare. The marshal asked their names.

"I am called Wu Yong," said the brigand military advisor, "and these are Zhu Wu, Xiao Rang and Yue Ho. We have been sent by brother Song Jiang to welcome Your Excellency."

“Why, Master Wu, how nice to see you again! It's been years since last we parted in Huazhou. Who would have thought that we'd meet again today'. I am fully aware of the fidelity and righteousness in your hearts. Corrupt ministers have used their authority to conceal the true facts from the emperor. But now he knows, and has dispatched me with his personal amnesty, imperial wine and various gifts. You need have no hesitation about accepting them.”

The four kowtowed their thanks and said: “It is entirely due to the marshal's kindness that we crude rustics living in a mountain wilderness have the good fortune to meet Your Excellency and receive His Majesty's benevolence! It shall be engraved always on our hearts and bones! We don't know how we can ever repay!”

Prefect Zhang entertained them that night at a banquet.

Early the next morning in Jizhou three carts were laden with burning incense. A group of porters bore the imperial wine in a phoenix and dragon decorated case. Another group carried gold and silver slabs, and silks and satins of red and green. A miniature pavilion housed the emperor's decree. Marshal Su rode beside it as the procession headed east. Prefect Zhang, also on horseback, followed, with Wu Yong and the other three riding in his wake. Horsemen leading the way in the tightly packed assembly carried the gold-lettered imperial yellow banner, preceded by troops with fluttering pennants beating golden drums.

For nearly ten *li* they advanced along the winding road, and soon reached the first shelter. Marshal Su noted the gay bunting and the tootling musicians playing a welcoming tune. A few score li beyond they arrived at another decorated shelter. Ahead they saw, amid swirling incense, Song Jiang and Lu Junyi kneeling in the road, and behind them, also on their knees in neat ranks, all the other chieftains, big and small, waiting to welcome the imperial decree.

“Let everyone mount,” the marshal directed.

They rode together to the water's edge, where many boats ferried them to the Shore of Golden Sands. Above and below the three passes music soared

to the heavens. Soldiers, celebrants, in clouds of incense, flowed in long lines to Loyalty Hall.

There the riders dismounted, and the incense and the imperial decree in the miniature pavilion were carried into the hall. In the center stood three ceremonial tables skirted with imperial yellow gauze of dragon and phoenix design. The decree was placed on the central table before the tablet representing the emperor, which was in the exact middle of the room. The gold and silver slabs were set on the left table, the red and green satin on the right, while the imperial wine and the cloth for the coats and linings were placed before the tables on the floor. From a golden burner rose the fragrance of fine incense.

Song Jiang and Lu Junyi escorted Marshal Su and Prefect Zhang to the seats of honor. Xiao Rang and Yue Ho stood on the left, Pei Xuan and Yan Qing stood on the right. Lu and the others knelt before the dignitaries. At Pei Xuan's command, all kowtowed. Xiao Rang then read the decree:

Imperial Edict: From the day I assumed the throne I have ruled with virtue and righteousness, changing the world by ceremonial rectitude, bringing peace through punishments and rewards. Never have I ceased seeking good ministers or loving the populace. Broadly have I dispensed charity, endeavoring to bestow happiness equally upon all. The people enjoy my benevolence, even infants know my concern.

Song Jiang, Lu Junyi and their men are loyal and righteous, and do not engage in violent persecution. For a long time they have wished to return and display their gratitude. Although they have committed crimes, it was not without reason. In view of their sincerity, I sympathize with them deeply. I have directed Marshal Su to deliver my amnesty to Song Jiang and the other offenders presently residing in Liangshan Marsh. I bestow also on Song Jiang and his higher chieftains thirty-six slabs of gold and thirty-six bolts of red satin; to his lesser chieftains I give seventy-two slabs of silver and seventy-two bolts of green satin. From the date of this decree let them cast doubt aside, return quickly and submit. Important tasks will be given them.

Let this document be proclaimed so that all may know.

The second month, __ day, spring,

in the fourth year of Xuan He

“Long live the emperor!,” shouted Song Jiang and his cohorts. They fell to their knees and kowtowed. As Pei Xuan called the roll, Marshal Su dispensed the gifts. The imperial wine was opened and poured into a huge silver tureen. From this it was ladled out, warmed and placed in a silver wine pot. Marshal Su filled a golden goblet and addressed the chieftains.

“On orders from our sovereign I have brought this imperial wine as a gift. Fear it not, warriors. See, I drink before you.”

He drained the cup, and the chieftains voiced their thanks. Su filled it again and presented it to Song Jiang. Song dropped to his knees and drank. Lu Junyi, Wu Yong and Gongsun Sheng were each in turn handed the goblet. Finally, Su toasted all one hundred and eight chieftains together.

Song Jiang directed that the wine be poured, and invited Marshal Su to be seated in the center of the hall. The chieftains paid their respects. Song Jiang then approached.

“I had the honor of meeting you at the temple on the West Sacred Mountain. I'm profoundly grateful for your kindness. Thanks to your efforts with those close to the emperor, my men and I are able to see the sun again. We shall never forget.”

“I knew how loyal you all are, and that you act in Heaven's behalf, but I didn't realize you were being wronged. And so I dared not put in a word for you before. I'm sorry for the delay. It wasn't until I received the letter from Chief of Staff Wen and your generous gift that I began to learn what was going on. While chatting with emperor in Mantled in Incense Hall one day I managed to tell him. He checked and found what I told him was correct. The following day, while holding court in the Hall of Culture and Virtue in

the presence of all his officials, he severely castigated Chancellor of Military Affairs Tong Guan, and blamed Marshal Gao for having repeatedly failed. He called for his writing equipment, personally penned an amnesty, and entrusted me to bring it and present you and your chieftains with gifts. I hope you will wind up your business here quickly and report to the capital. You must show yourselves worthy of the emperor's benevolence."

All were very pleased and respectfully expressed their thanks. Song Jiang invited Chief of Staff Wen to join them. The happy reunion between Su and Wen spread joy throughout the hall. Wen and Prefect Zhang were seated opposite Marshal Su, and everyone took his place at banquet tables according to rank. Many toasts were drunk, while outside the band vigorously played. Although the fare was not elaborate, there were mountains of meat and seas of wine. All drank heavily, and had to be supported to their quarters to rest.

The following day, they feasted again, talking of things old and new, and chatting about their aspirations. On the third day they dined once more, and took the marshal on a tour of the mountain. They returned to their quarters at dusk, many sodden with wine. After several such days, though Song Jiang and his chieftains were reluctant to let him go, the marshal said he must leave for the capital.

"You don't understand," he explained. "It's been some time since I delivered the amnesty. If you heroes return promptly, all will be well. If you don't, false and jealous ministers will very likely gossip."

"We were hoping you'd stay a few days more," said Song Jiang, "but since you feel you must go, of course we won't detain you. Let's have one more day of drinking, and we'll see you off early tomorrow morning."

The chieftains joined in a merry feast, and again voiced their thanks in the course of toasts. Marshal Su spoke flattering and reassuring words. They caroused until night.

The next morning horses and carts were readied. Song Jiang brought gold and jewels on a platter to the marshal's quarters, and respectfully presented them. Only after Song Jiang's repeated urging did Su accept and place them

in his chest of clothing. His luggage packed, his horse saddled, the marshal prepared to set forth.

Those returning with him were given food and wine by Zhu Wu and Yue Ho, and lavishly rewarded with money and clothing material, to their great delight. Gold and valuables were also presented to Chief of Staff Wen and Prefect Zhang. They accepted only after Song Jiang insisted. He ordered that Wen depart with Marshal Su.

To the beat of golden drums and the trilling of fifes the chieftains accompanied the marshal down the mountain, proceeding a distance of thirty *li* after crossing the river at the Shore of Golden Sands. There all dismounted and raised their wine cups in a farewell toast.

“When you see the emperor, Marshal, please give him an excellent report,” said Song Jiang.

“Rest assured, warrior. Wind up your affairs and come to the capital as soon as possible. When your army nears the city be sure to send someone on ahead to notify me. I'll inform the emperor and dispatch a welcoming party. We want to do this in proper style.”

“Excellency, I beg your indulgence. Wang Lun built the mountain stronghold in this small marsh of ours, and he was succeeded by Chao Gai. I, in turn, have ruled here for many years. Damage to the neighboring populace has been considerable. For the next ten days I'd like to distribute our wealth among them. Once that's done we'll hasten to the capital without further delay. Would you please convey this to the emperor so that he'll allow us a bit more time.”

Marshal Su assented. He bid them farewell and, with his entourage, headed for Jizhou.

Song Jiang and his men returned to the stronghold. In Loyalty Hall the assembly drum was beaten. As the chieftains seated themselves all the officers gathered. Song Jiang addressed them.

“Brothers, ever since Wang Lun established the fortress and Chao Gai strengthened it this place has flourished. Many years have passed since you brothers rescued me at Jiangzhou and chose me as leader. Today we've been amnestied and have seen the face of the sun again. Soon we shall go to the capital, serve our country, win prestige and privileges for our wives and children, and enjoy the blessings of peace. Those of you who have things which should go in the storerooms deliver them there for our common use. The remaining property shall be divided equally among us in a righteous manner with no contention.

“We hundred and eight are all stars. We live and die together. The emperor's amnesty frees us of any crimes. Soon we shall go to the capital and see His Majesty. We must be worthy of his benevolence. As to you other officers, some of you came with the intention of joining us, some simply followed others, some are army officers who lost their commands, others were captured. If you wish to go with us to the capital, you may enroll. If you don't, you may resign. I will pay you off and you can return to civilian life.”

On Song Jiang's instructions Pei Xuan and Xiao Rang prepared two registers. After discussion among the members of the three armies four or five thousand men resigned. Song Jiang gave them money and gifts and sent them on their way. Those who wished to remain registered for duty.

The next day Song Jiang had Xiao Rang write proclamations and sent men out to post them in all the neighboring towns and hamlets. Everyone was invited to come to the mountain for a ten-day close-out. The proclamation read as follows:

Notice from Song Jiang and his warriors in Liangshan Marsh: Because in the past we occupied these hills and groves we caused considerable disturbance among the neighboring populace. Now His Imperial Majesty has amnestied our crimes and we are returning to his service. As a recompense to you neighbors we are holding a close-out for ten days. We shall dispense our property among you, free of charge. This is absolutely true. Have no doubts. Please honor us with your presence. It will be our pleasure.

__ day of the third month of the fourth year of Xuan He

Song Jiang and his warriors of Liangshan Marsh

From the storerooms gold and jewels, silks and satins were distributed among the chieftains and officers and men. Another portion was selected as a gift for the government. The remainder was piled in the fortress for dispensation during the ten-day close-out.

This ran from the third to the thirteenth of the third month. Meat and wine were liberally served to the people, who came in droves, carrying empty bags and trays. Song Jiang ordered that they be compensated at the rate of ten times the damage suffered. Happily the recipients thanked him and departed.

When the close-out ended, the chieftains began packing for the trip to the capital. Song Jiang thought the men's families should return to their old homes. But Wu Yong had another idea.

“Better keep them here, brother,” he said. “It will be time enough for them to go home after we've seen the emperor and been assured of his kindness.”

Song Jiang saw the point. “You're right.” He ordered the chieftains to get on with their packing and, at the same time, reorganize their troops.

They very soon set out, and quickly reached Jizhou where they warmly thanked Prefect Zhang Shuye. He gave a banquet for all the warriors and rewarded the ranks of the three armies.

Song Jiang thanked the prefect and they left the city. Preceded by an advance contingent of six or seven hundred they marched towards the Eastern Capital. Dai Zong and Yan Qing were sent on ahead to notify Marshal Su. The marshal promptly informed the emperor: “Song Jiang and his army are on their way.”

The sovereign was very pleased. He directed the marshal and the imperial controller to greet the arrivals with pennants and standards. The two at once left the city.

The brigand forces were marching in smart formation. In the fore were two red banners, one reading *Obey Heaven,* the other *Defend the Country.* The chieftains were in full armor. The only exceptions were Wu Yong—who wore a black silk head kerchief, Gongsun Sheng— who wore a heron feathered Taoist coat, Sagacious Lu—in a fiery red Buddhist robe, and Wu Song—in a pilgrim's black cassock. All the others were in battle dress with metal fittings.

They had been marching for many a day, and now, as they neared the capital, the vanguard saw coming towards them the imperial controller with pennants and standards. Song Jiang was informed. He and his chieftains went first to greet Marshal Su then halted the army outside the New Official Gate, set up shelters, and waited for the emperor's summons.

Marshal Su and the imperial controller entered the city and informed the emperor.

“I've heard a lot about Song Jiang and his chieftains,” said the sovereign. “A hundred and eight of them, bold and courageous, all corresponding to star spirits. Remarkable men. Today they have submitted and returned to the capital to become respectable citizens. I shall proceed with my officials to Xuante Tower. Let Song Jiang and his chieftains march in full armor at the head of their army and enter the city, but with not more than four or fire hundred troops. I will review them as they march from east to west. I also want the people and the officials, civil and military, to know these gallant heroes who are now our loyal subjects. Then let them divest themselves of their armor and weapons, put on the satin robes which I have presented to them, and enter the palace through East Glory Gate. I shall receive them in the Hall of Culture and Virtue.”

The imperial controller went to the brigands' camp and transmitted the message to Song Jiang.

The next day Song Jiang had Ironclad Virtue Pei Xuan select six or seven hundred stalwart men, and before these place golden drums and colorful flags, then a corps of spear and sword and ax bearers, with the two red banners *Obey Heaven and Defend the Country* in between. Every man carried a sword and bow and arrows, and wore full armor. In ranks they entered the city's East Gate.

Civil and military, the whole populace had turned out, supporting the old and holding the young. They lined the roads and stared at the brigands as if they were gods. The emperor and his officials watched from the tower. They saw the golden drums and fluttering pennants, the swords and axes in gleaming array, the white fetlocked cavalry, and the red banners *Obey Heaven* and *Defend the Country.* In addition there was a band of thirty or so mounted musicians, drumming and blowing. Finally came the massed ranks of the stalwarts. Xie Zhen and Xie Bao cleared the road for the procession, Zhu Wu brought up the rear.

The emperor was delighted at this magnificent display. He said admiringly to his officials: “They are indeed heroes!”

He instructed the chief of ceremonies to tell Song Jiang and the chieftains to change into ceremonial clothes and be prepared to be received at court. The order was transmitted. Outside the place gate the men removed their armor, donned the satin robes of red and green, attached the slabs of gold and silver, put on the special hats and pale green boots worn at imperial audiences. Gongsun Sheng had tailored his red satin into a Taoist coat, Sagacious Lu had made a Buddhist robe, and Wu Song a pilgrim's cassock. All had used the material presented by the emperor. With Song Jiang and Lu Junyi in the lead, seconded by Wu Yong and Gongsun Sheng, and followed by the other chieftains, they entered the East Glory Gate. The ceremonial fittings and paraphernalia had already been placed in order.

By then it was early morning, and the sovereign arrived at the Hall of Culture and Virtue. The master of rites led Song Jiang and the chieftains into the royal presence. They formed lines and, in keeping with the commands of the chief of ceremonies, kowtowed and shouted, “Long live the emperor!” Pleased, His Majesty invited them to draw near and be seated according to rank. On his order, a banquet was laid by the imperial caterers.

The emperor's vintners brought the wine, the Delicacies Department brought the entrees, the royal chefs did the cooking, and the official Banquet Bureau served the food, while in the background music played. The emperor, in his royal chair, joined them personally at the table.

The feasting went on until dusk. Song Jiang and the chieftains thanked the sovereign, and left the palace with flowers in their hair. Outside the West Glory Gate they mounted their horses and rode back to camp. The next day they again entered the city and went with the imperial master of rites to the hall of Culture and Virtue to express their gratitude. His Majesty, very pleased, was thinking of giving them official rank so that they would qualify for appointment to government posts. Again Song Jiang and the chieftains thanked him and returned to camp.

But the Chancellor of Military Affairs said to the emperor: “They've only just submitted and have not yet won any merit. They shouldn't be given rank so easily. They ought to distinguish themselves in battle, first. What's more, there are thousands of them camped outside our gates. That's a bad situation. Among Song Jiang's forces are officers of the capital garrison who fell into his hands. They should return to it. Officers and men from other armies should also go back to their original units. The remainder should be divided into five columns, and assigned to duty in different parts of Shandong and Hebei. That would be best.”

The next day, the sovereign sent the imperial controller to the camp with a directive: *Song Jiang's forces shall be disbanded and returned to their original units.*

The chieftains were angry. They said: “Though we've submitted to the throne, not only aren't we given rank, but you want to split us brothers up! We chieftains have vowed to live and die together! If you insist on dividing us, we have no choice but to go back to Liangshan Marsh!”

Song Jiang hastily stopped them. He begged the controller to explain the situation to the emperor. The controller reported word for word, not daring to leave anything out. Startled, His Majesty summoned his Chancellor of Military Affairs.

“Although those fellows have surrendered, they haven't actually changed. Sooner or later, they're going to make serious trouble,” said the chancellor. “It seems to me you should issue an order which will lure them into the capital, exterminate the whole hundred and eight, and then disband their army. This will save the country from disaster.”

The sovereign hesitated. From behind a screen, a high official emerged, dressed in a purple gown and holding an ivory tablet.

“On every border the beacon fires burn continuously,” he shouted, “and within the country there is danger of internal calamity! It's all because treacherous ministers like you are wrecking His Majesty's domain!”

Truly, only this voice calling for strengthening the nation and pacifying its borders could save our Heaven-startling, Earth-shaking heroes.

Who was this official who so timely appeared? Read our next chapter.

Chapter 83
Song Jiang Is Ordered to Smash the Liao Tartars At Chen Bridge Station Weeping He Executes a Subordinate

That year the king of the Liao Tartars dispatched his armies over the mountains. First they occupied nine border prefectures. Then, in four columns, they swept down and pillaged Shandong, Shanxi, Henan and Hebei. Every prefecture and county sent petitions to the throne pleading for rescue. All such documents had to pass through the hands of Tong Guan, Chancellor of Military Affairs. He talked it over with Prime Minister Cai Jing, Marshal Gao Qiu and Marshal Yang Jian, and they decided not to forward the petitions. They only notified a few neighboring prefectures and urged them to send reinforcements and relief. This was as futile as trying to fill a well with snow. People knew about it, but they kept the facts from the emperor.

Then, the four crooked ministers hatched a scheme. They arranged for Tong Guan to propose to the sovereign a means that would destroy Song Jiang and his men. They hadn't expected that another important minister would

intervene. The man who hurried out from behind the screen was Marshal Su Yanjing, and he appealed directly to the emperor.

“Your Majesty! Song Jiang and his bold fellows have just surrendered. The hundred and eight of them are extremely close and devoted. They'd never agree to being separated. They'd rather die, first. And now, some people want to have them killed! These gallant men are extremely brave and intelligent. If, when you bring them into the city, they rise up in revolt, then what? How will you deal with them?

“The Liao Tartars have occupied nine border prefectures with a hundred thousand troops, and every county is petitioning for relief. We have sent some units, but it's been like splashing water on ants. The enemy is too powerful. Our forces can't cope with them. We've lost every engagement. All this news has been kept from you.

“In my humble opinion if we dispatched Song Jiang and his fine generals and all the troops under their command to the border, they could defeat the Liao bandits. Sending them into battle will truly be of great advantage to our country. As a mere minister I cannot order this, myself, but I beg Your Majesty to consider.”

Pleasure suffused the emperor's countenance. He queried his officials. All agreed that Su's proposal was reasonable. The sovereign angrily berated Tong Guan and his fellow conspirators.

“By your slanders and lies you've harmed our country. Your jealousy of talent has blocked the path of the meritorious. Your distortions have seriously damaged affairs of state! But I will forgive you this time and not pursue the matter.”

The emperor personally drew an edict naming Song Jiang as the Vanguard General against the Liao Tartars, and stating that his chieftains would be awarded official rank in keeping with how they distinguished themselves. He directed Marshal Su to deliver the edict to Song Jiang at his camp. The sovereign dismissed court and his officials withdrew.

Marshal Su brought the imperial document to Song Jiang's camp and told him the emperor's intention. Song Jiang hastily lit incense, kowtowed in thanks for His Majesty's benevolence, and opened the edict. It read as follows:

Edict: When Emperor Shun assumed the throne, he raised Gao Tao to enforce his rule. When Tang became sovereign, he appointed Yi Yin to maintain peace. From the time I established my reign I have been tireless in selecting men of excellence. Recently, Song Jiang and his cohorts have joined us. They wish to obey Heaven and defend the country. They are all honorable and entirely faithful. Such great talent should not be used lightly.

Now, the Liao armies have invaded our borders. I have appointed Song Jiang as the Vanguard General to smash them, and Lu Junyi as “Vice-Vanguard General. His other officers will be awarded appropriate rank when their meritorious deeds are reported to the throne. Let them all set out at once, go directly to the enemy's lair, castigate the evildoers, save the people, and purge our border regions. Each prefecture through which they pass shall supply them with money and grain. They are authorized to punish any official who fails to comply.

This imperial edict is hereby proclaimed.

__ *day of the fifth month of the fourth year of Xuan He*

Song Jiang, Lu Junyi, and the other chieftains, who had listened, kneeling, while the document was being read, were very pleased. They kowtowed, and Song Jiang expressed their thanks to Marshal Su.

“We've been hoping for a chance like this to serve out country,” he said, “to win credit and position and become loyal officials. You've been kinder to us than our own parents, intervening with the emperor on our behalf. Our only problem is that we still haven't disposed of Chao Gai's spirit tablet on Mount Liangshan, and our families haven't yet returned to our homes. And

our walls and battlements must be destroyed and our ships of war brought here. Would you please request His Majesty to allow us to return to the mountain and attend to these matters? Then we can get our arms and equipment in order and devote ourselves entirely to serving the nation."

Marshal Su gladly assented and reported to the emperor, who instructed the treasure to draw one thousand ounces of gold and five thousand ounces of silver, plus five thousand bolts of satin, and issue them to the chieftains. He ordered the marshal to handle the distribution at the camp. The gifts were to be given to the dependents of those with families, to guarantee their support for the rest of their lives. Chieftains without families would receive the gifts directly, to use as they saw fit.

Imperial order in hand, Song Jiang expressed his thanks and directed the distribution. As he was leaving for the palace, the marshal offered Song Jiang a few words of advice.

"Go to the mountain, General, but come back quickly. Let me know of your return in advance. There must be no delay."

Song Jiang and his chieftains then conferred on who should go. They decided that these should be Song Jiang, his chief generals Wu Yong, Gongsun Sheng, Lin Chong, Liu Tang, Du Qian, Song Wan, Zhu Gui, Song Qing and the three Ruan brothers—together with cavalry, infantry and naval forces of over ten thousand. The rest of the army would remain encamped near the capital under Vice-Vanguard General Lu Junyi. The journey to the mountain stronghold was uneventful. Seated in Loyalty Hall, Song Jiang instructed the families to pack and get ready to start for home. He also ordered that pigs and sheep be slaughtered, incense and candles lit, and ingots and horses of paper burned as sacrifices to the spirit of Chao Gai. Then the former leader's spirit tablet was also reduced to ashes and a feast laid for all the chieftains.

In carts and on horseback the families departed for their original homes. Song Jiang directed his retainers to escort their families and old Squire Song and his household back to their native village in Yuncheng County and become respectable citizens again.

He told the three Ruan brothers to select the most useful of the ships of war, and to distribute the remaining smaller craft among the neighboring populace. These could also dismantle the buildings and take the materials. The fortifications in the three passes and structures like Loyalty Hall were to be destroyed.

When all this was done and everything put in order, the armed forces were assembled. They returned swiftly to the capital.

The march was without incident, and they soon reached the camp where Lu Junyi and the others were waiting. Yan Qing was sent on to the city to inform Marshal Su that they were ready to take leave of the sovereign and commence the expedition. The marshal duly notified the emperor.

The next day His Majesty received Song Jiang and his chieftains with smiling countenance in the Hall of Martial Heroes. Libation cups were drunk, and the sovereign, extremely pleased, spoke.

“Go forth and crush the Liao Tartars. Let us hear news of victory soon. We shall make much important use of you. As to your generals, they shall be awarded rank according to their merit. Let there be no delay!”

Song Jiang kowtowed and offered thanks. “I was only a petty functionary who committed a heinous crime and was exiled to Jiangzhou,” he said. “There, for rebellious words written while drunk, I was condemned to execution in the public square. These brothers rescued me, and since I had no place else to hide, I took refuge with them in Liangshan Marsh. For all these crimes I deserve ten thousand deaths! Yet Your Majesty, in your vast benevolence, has seen fit to pardon me. Though I split my liver and gall with exertion, I shall never be able to repay Your Majesty's kindness! I shall certainly expend my utmost strength and devotion to carry out your royal order, or die gladly in the attempt'.”

Very pleased, the sovereign again awarded cups of imperial wine. At his direction, Song Jiang was presented with a gold-embossed set of bow and arrows, a fully accoutered fine steed, and a precious sword. Song Jiang kowtowed and voiced his gratitude.

Then he took leave of the emperor and returned to camp with the imperial gifts. He ordered his commanders to prepare to march.

Emperor Hui Zong the following morning directed Marshal Su to transmit his order to the Council of Administration to dispatch two officials to Chen Bridge Station and there give send-off rations to Song Jiang's departing troops. Each man was to receive a bottle of wine and a catty of meat, and not an ounce less. The chancellor worked through the night, preparing the rations, then sent two officials to distribute them.

Song Jiang, after conferring with Wu Yong, divided his army into two groups, with the five Tiger and eight Wildcat chieftains leading the infantry in the van and the ten Charger chieftains leading the cavalry bringing up the rear. He himself, together with Lu Junyi, Wu Yong and Gongsun Sheng, would command the central forces. The three Ruan brothers, Li Chun, Zhang Heng and Zhang Shun, under whom would be Tong Wei, Tong Meng, Meng Kang, Wang Dingliu and the various sailor chiefs, would command the naval vessels, and sail from the Caiho River into the Yellow, and there proceed north. Song Jiang announced that the army would follow the highway from Chen Bridge Station, and instructed his chieftains to forbid any harassment of the local populace.

The two officials designated by the Council of Administration arrived at Chen Bridge Station to distribute the emperor's largesse to Song Jiang's forces. Shamelessly dishonest, they stinted for their own private gain. These bribe-taking back-biting liars gave out wine bottles that were only half full, and the catty of meat each man received weighed only ten ounces instead of sixteen.

After distributing to the forward group, the officials came to a rear unit whose troops wore black helmets and black armor. They were shield-bearers under Xiang Chong and Li Gun. Among these was a junior commander who discovered the chicanery and angrily berated the two officials.

“It's grafters like you who sabotage the emperor's benevolence!”

“What do you mean?” they cried.

“His Majesty ordered a bottle of wine and a catty of meat for each man, and you've cut them both! We don't like to quarrel, but your characters are a disgrace! You'd steal the gilt off the face of an idol of Buddha!”

“You've got a nerve! Slicing to death would be too good for you! You're still a Liangshan Marsh rebel!”

Furious, the young officer threw the meat and wine in their faces.

“Arrest that rascally robber!” they howled.

The young man drew his sword from the edge of his shield. The official pointed at him indignantly.

“Dirty bandit! Would you dare use that blade!”

“When I was on Mount Liangshan I was better than the best of your fighters! I killed thousands of them! Why would I scruple about a couple of crooks!”

“We dare you to kill us,” they bawled.

The young commander stepped forward and slashed the face of one of them. He collapsed to the ground. The watchers cried out in alarm and fell back. The junior officer hacked again several more time. Clearly, the man was dying. It was too late for the troops to intervene.

Xiang Chong and Li Gun flew to inform Song Jiang. Startled, he exclaimed to Wu Yong: “What are we going to do?”

“The Chancellor of Administration doesn't like us. This thing gives him precisely the chance he's been looking for,” mused Wu Yong. “All we can do is direct the execution of our officer, report the matter to the Council of Ministration, halt our march and await a disposition. Have Dai Zong and Yan Qing rush to the city and quietly notify Marshal Su. Request him to inform the emperor of the provocation. That will forestall the chancellor from twisting the facts. I guarantee nothing will come of it.”

The strategy agreed upon, Song Jiang galloped to Chen Bridge Station. The junior officer was standing beside the body of the slain official. Song Jiang directed that wine and meat be taken from the hostel for officials and dispensed among the troops. Then he summoned the young officer into the hostel and questioned him.

“He kept cursing us and saying we were rebellious bandits from Liangshan Marsh, and that we all ought to be exterminated! I lost my temper and killed him. I'm waiting for your sentence, General.”

“He was an official of the imperial court. I was afraid of him myself. How could you slay him? We're all sure to be implicated. Our march against the Liao Tartars had only started, we haven't yet won a bit of distinction, and you pull a stunt like this. What are we going to do?”

The young commander prostrated himself and waited for death. Song Jiang wept.

“From the time I came to Mount Liangshan I never harmed any of our brothers, big or small. But now that I'm an official I have no choice. I must obey the law. I know your aggressive spirit is still strong, but you shouldn't have given free rein to it as you did in the old days.”

“I'm ready to die.”

Song Jiang ordered the young officer to drink heavily of wine and hang himself from a tree. When this was done he had him decapitated.

The body of the official was formally encoffined, and a letter sent to the Council of Administration. Actually, the chancellor already knew all about it, but of that we'll say no more.

Dai Zong and Yan Qing hurried directly to Marshal Su's residency on entering the city and told him in detail what had happened. That evening the marshal went to the palace and informed the emperor. The following day His Majesty held court in the Hall of Culture and Virtue. When the drum boomed in the dragon tower and the bell sounded in the phoenix belfry, the

seneschal rapped three times with his rod and the civil and military officials formed ranks in two groups at the foot of the stairs.

From among them the Chancellor of Administration came forward and said: “A soldier in the army of Song Jiang, who only recently surrendered to the throne, has killed an official our chancellery dispatched to distribute wine and meat. We hope Your Majesty will look into the matter.”

“I entrusted your chancellery with a mission. The responsibility is yours,” replied the sovereign. “Your men were untrustworthy. That was the cause. They deliberately cut the meat and wine ration. The Mount Liangshan soldier refused to be cheated, and a clash was the result.”

“Who would dare cut the imperial wine?” the chancellor protested.

The emperor grew angry. “I've already sent an investigator, and I know the whole story. You can't deceive me with your subtle words and evasions! You dispensed only half bottles of my gift of imperial wine, the meat you gave only ten ounces to the catty. That is what enraged the soldier and caused the bloodshed!” Then His Majesty asked: “Where is the culprit?”

“Song Jiang has decapitated him and says that his head will be displayed. He has reported the matter to the chancellery, halted his march and is waiting for a disposition.”

“Let his breach of discipline be noted. We shall settle the matter according to his merits when he returns from defeating the Liaos.”

Silently, the chancellor withdrew. His Majesty dispatched an emissary to urge Song Jiang to continue his expedition after displaying the head of the decapitated young officer at Chen Bridge Station.

Song Jiang expressed thanks for the emperor's benevolence, hung up the head as directed and buried the body. Heart-brokenly, he wept. Then he wiped his tears, mounted, and headed north with his army.

Every day they covered sixty *li* before making camp. They caused no trouble in any of the counties and prefectures through which they passed.

The march was uneventful, and after a time they neared the borders of the Liao Tartars.

“The Liaos have been invading us in four columns,” Song Jiang said to Wu Yong. “Should we divide up and go after them, or attack their cities and towns?”

“It's a vast territory and thinly populated. If we split up we won't be able to coordinate. Better take a few cities first, then we'll see. If we hit them hard they'll naturally call back their soldiers.”

“An excellent plan,” approved Song Jiang. He summoned Duan Jingzhu and said: “You know the northern roads well. I'm going to let you lead the advance. Which is the nearest prefecture?”

“Tanzhou is right ahead. It's a vital entry to Liao territory. A deep river called the Lushui winds around the prefectural city and connects with the River Weiho. You'll need warships to attack Tanzhou. Once our flotilla arrives we can assault from land and water together, and take the city.”

Song Jiang dispatched Dai Zong to urge Li Jun and the other naval chieftains to hasten their armada and assemble in the Lushui.

Dongxian Bojin, the man who commanded the Tanzhou garrison, was a vice-minister of the Kingdom of Liao. Under him were four fierce generals —Aliqi, Yaor Weikang, Chu Mingyu and Cao Mingji. All were absolutely fearless. When Vice-Minister Dongxian learned that Song Jiang and his entire army had been dispatched by the Emperor of Song and was nearing his territory, he reported at once in writing to the king. He requested aid from the neighboring prefectures of Qizhou, Bazhou, Zhuozhou and Xiongzhou, and at the same time sent his soldiers to meet the enemy. Aliqi and Chu Mingyu took leave of the duke and led forth thirty thousand men.

Meanwhile, Guan Sheng the Big Halberd was advancing with the forward section of the vanguard towards Miyun County, which was part of the

prefecture of Tanzhou. The county magistrate hurriedly reported this to the two Tartar generals.

“The Song emperor's army is marching this way with banners flying. They're all amnestied brigands from Liangshan Marsh under Song Jiang.”

Aliqi laughed. “They're only bandits. Why worry?” He ordered his soldiers to make camp and prepare to give battle outside Miyun.

The next day, Song Jiang heard that Liao forces were approaching, and he instructed his troops to engage them. “We'll test their mettle,” he said. “But we don't want any unnecessary losses.”

The chieftains donned their armor and mounted. Song Jiang and Lu Junyi rode personally to the front lines to observe. Far off they could see the Tartar forces, who carried black flags and banners, advancing in dark swarms that covered the earth and obscured the sky. Arrows from the bows of both sides stopped the contending hosts a distance apart.

The black flags separated. On a magnificent prancing horse a Tartar general rode forth. He was fair complected, with red lips, golden hair and green eyes, and was tall and powerful. The banner behind him read:

Aliqi, General of the Great Liao Kingdom.

Song Jiang looked. “That general is not to be underestimated,” he said to his chieftains.

Before the words were out of his mouth, Xu Ning the Metal Lancer rode forth, his sickle-bladed lance held athwart. Aliqi hooted at the sight of him.

“The Song Dynasty is doomed! Sending scruffy bandits as officers! What brass to invade our great nation! Only death awaits you!”

“You worthless officer, disgrace to your country, how dare you insult us!”

The armies of both sides shouted as Aliqi and Xu Ning clashed in combat. For more than thirty rounds they fought, and Xu Ning realized he could not win. He withdrew towards his own lines, pursued by the Tartar general. Hua

Rong hastily notched an arrow to his bowstring. But Zhang Qin, leaning on the pommel of his saddle, had already drawn a stone from his brocaded pouch, and now he flung it at the approaching general. Like a streaking meteor, like an arrow from a bow, it struck Aliqi near the left eye and knocked him head over heels to the ground. Hua Rong, Lin Chong, Qin Ming and Suo Chao galloped forward and caught first the fine steed, then Aliqi himself.

Chu Mingyu, Aliqi's second in command, wanted to rush to his rescue, but Song Jiang's entire army charged in a murderous assault that swept the Tartars from Miyun County. It inflicted such heavy losses that the defenders fled back to Tanzhou. Song Jiang did not follow. Instead, he made camp in Miyun.

He went to see Aliqi. The stone had hit him at the end of the eyebrow, near the temple, destroying the eye. The Tartar general died in great pain.

Song Jiang ordered that he be cremated, and had Zhang Qin credited with the First Merit in the record book. Aliqi's chain armor, his decorated lance of white pear wood, his jade-embossed belt with its lion's head buckle, his dappled silver-grey steed, plus his boots, robe, bow and arrows, were all given to Zhang Qin. That day the expeditionary force celebrated the victory with a feast in Miyun. Of that no more need be said.

The next day Song Jiang broke camp and ordered his army to march directly on Tanzhou. When Vice-Minister Dongxian was informed that they were advancing, and learned that they had killed one of his generals, he closed the gates and directed his troops to remain inside the city. Then he heard that a naval armada had also reached the walls, and went with his generals to look from the ramparts. He saw Song Jiang's chieftains, waving banners and brandishing weapons, shouting challenges as they stood in bold array.

“No wonder our young Aliqi was defeated,” said the vice-minister.

“Who says he was defeated?” Chu Mingyu protested. “He was vanquishing the barbarian chieftain, chasing after him when a savage dressed in green

knocked him from his horse with a stone. It took four barbarians with lances to capture him. Our side was caught unawares. That's why we lost."

"What does the stone-throwing savage look like?"

Someone pointed Zhang Qin out. "See that fellow with the black pouch, wearing our young general's clothes and armor and riding his steed? That's the one."

Dongxian leaned over the ramparts for a closer look. But Zhang Qin had seen him first. Galloping forward, he winged a stone. It grazed Dongxian's ear, scraping off a bit of skin. His retinue shouted in alarm.

"The savage has a formidable skill," muttered the vice-minister, nursing his painful ear. He came down from the wall and wrote a report to the Liao Tartar king. He also notified all the prefectures along the border to be on their guard.

For four or five days Song Jiang's army attacked, to no avail. They retired to Miyun and made camp. While Song Jiang was conferring in headquarters, Dai Zong came and reported that the naval chieftains had arrived at the Lushui River on ships of war. Song Jiang sent Dai Zong to summon them to headquarters. Before long, Li Jun and the others appeared.

"This is not like battling in the marsh," Song Jiang reminded him. "Find out first where the water is deep and where it is shallow, then advance. The Lushui current is swift. If anything goes wrong, we won't he able to save you. Proceed carefully. Keep your men concealed. Pretend you're delivering grain to Tanzhou. I want you chieftains to carry hidden weapons and stay under cover. Have only four or five men plying the oars and two on shore pulling the two ropes on each vessel. Move slowly towards the city and moor the boats on either shore outside and wait for our land forces. When the Tanzhou authorities see you they're sure to open the river gate to get the grain quickly. At that moment all of you burst out and capture the gate. You'll earn great distinction."

Li Jun and the naval chieftains acknowledged the order and departed. A junior officer entered and reported.

“A huge army is tearing in this direction from the northwest. They're carrying black flags. There are over ten thousand of them, and they're moving towards Tanzhou.”

“They must be reinforcements from the king of the Liaos,” said Wu Yong. “Let's send out a few chieftains to block and scatter them. We don't want them to stiffen the courage of the troops in the city.”

Song Jiang mobilized Zhang Qin, Dong Ping, Guan Sheng and Lin Chong, with a dozen or so small chieftains and five thousand troops, and dispatched them at flying speed to meet the foe.

When the king of the Liao Tartars heard that the gallant Song Jiang of Liangshan Marsh had cut through with his army directly to Tanzhou and had surrounded the city, he ordered two of his nephews to lead a relief expedition. One was called Yelu Guozhen, the other Yelu Guobao. Both were Liao generals, both were royal nephews, and both were immeasurably brave. At the head of ten thousand men, they were rushing to support Tanzhou. As they drew near, they were met by the Song forces. The two sides spread out in battle positions, and the two Tartar generals rode forward.

They were brothers. They were dressed the same, and they carried the same lances. From Song Jiang's ranks, General Two Spears Dong Ping cantered to the fore. He shouted to them in a powerful voice. “Where do you hail from, barbarian officers?” This infuriated Guozhen. “You marsh bandits invade out great kingdom, and you have the nerve to ask where we hail from!”

Dong Ping said no more, but galloped directly towards Yelu Guozhen with spears at the ready. The young Tartar was hot-tempered and unyielding. He lowered his metal lance and charged. The two horses met, the three points whirled. In the cloud of dust, in that murderous frenzy, the wielder of the two spears displayed exceptional skill, the manipulator of the metal lance showed miraculous ability. Fifty rounds they fought, with neither emerging the victor.

Guobao feared his older brother was tiring. He beat the headquarters' gong, signalling a call to withdraw. Guozhen was more than willing. The struggle was getting too hot for him. But Dong Ping locked him between the two spears and wouldn't let him go. Because Guozhen's mind was racing, his hands faltered. Dong Ping with his right arm swept aside the heavy green lance, with his left spear he stabbed into the base of his opponent's throat. Poor Guozhen's golden crown fell from his head, his feet turned skyward, and he tumbled from his saddle to the ground.

With levelled lance, Guobao galloped to the rescue. To Zhang Qin the Featherless Arrow this was too good an opportunity to miss. Socketing his pearwood lance, he drew a stone from his embroidered pouch. He clapped his steed and raced into the field of combat.

Quicker than it takes to say, when the two flying horses were about a hundred feet apart, and while the young Tartar was heedless of all but the coming clash, Zhang Qin drew back his arm and threw. “Take that!” he cried. The stone struck Guobao full in the face, and sent him somersaulting from his saddle.

Guan Sheng, Lin Chong and their troops swarmed forward. The Liao soldiers, leaderless, scattered in panic. Those of the ten thousand who escaped being slaughtered fled wildly. The fully caparisoned mounts of the royal nephews were captured, as were their golden standards. Guozhen and Guobao were Stripped of their jewelled crowns and robes and armor, and their heads were cut off.

Over a thousand battle chargers had been taken. These were driven to Miyun and presented to Song Jiang. Delighted, he rewarded his troops, and credited Dong Ping and Zhang Qin with the Second Merits. He would send a written report of the victory to the emperor after the capture of Tanzhou.

That night Song Jiang and Wu Yong worked out their strategy. Lin Chong and Guan Sheng were to lead a detachment of cavalry and assault Tanzhou from the northwest, Huyan Zhuo and Dong Ping would move with their horsemen from the northeast, Lu Junyi would attack from the southwest.

“I and our central forces will advance from the southeast. At the sound of our cannon, all strike together,” said Song Jiang.

He directed Ling Zhen the Heaven-Shaking Thunder, Black Whirlwind Li Kui, Fan Rui the Demon King Who Roils the World, and Bao Xu the God of Death, together with shield officers Xiang Chong and Li Gun and over a thousand shield-twirling soldiers, to proceed to the foot of the city walls, and from there fire the signal cannons when the time came.

At the second watch, land and naval forces would go into action together. The orders given, all units prepared for the assault.

Meanwhile, Dongxian the vice-minister waited in Tanzhou for his relief. Remnants of the defeated army of the royal nephews straggled into the city and told him what had occurred.

“Prince Yelu Guozhen was killed by a man wielding two spears. Yelu Guobao was knocked from his horse with a stone thrown by a fellow in a green turban and then seized and slain.”

The vice-minister stamped his foot in exasperation. “That savage again! He's caused the death of two royal nephews! How am I ever going to face the king! When I catch that green turbaned lout I'll pound him to bits.”

That evening a scout reported: “Six or seven hundred grain boats have moored along both banks of the Lushui, and an army is approaching in the distance.”

“Those barbarians don't know our waterways and have sailed their grain boats here by mistake,” said the vice-minister. “Their army is surely after the grain.”

He summoned Chu Mingyu, Cao Mingji and Yaor Weikang and gave the three generals his instructions: “Song Jiang and his barbarians have sent another large force against us. There are also a number of their grain boats in our river. Yaor Weikang, go out against the raiders with a thousand troops. Chu Mingyu and Cao Mingji, open the water gate and bring those

vessels in here, fast. Even if we get two out of three, that will be fine. You'll earn great distinction.”

At dusk that evening, Song Jiang's left flank infantry force, under Black Whirlwind and Fan Rui, advanced towards Tanzhou and began reviling the Tartars. Yaor Weikang, who had been ordered to go out against them by the duke, opened the city gate and lowered the drawbridge. But Black Whirlwind, Fan Rui, Bao Xu, Xiang Chong and Li Gun, with their thousand infantry, all fierce sword and shield men, dashed up and occupied the other end of the bridge, bottling the Tartars inside.

Ling Zhen had set up his cannon, and was waiting only for the time to fire them. Arrows were whizzing down from atop the city walls, but the shield bearers gave him protection. Bao Xu and the thousand men were yelling in the background. They sounded more like ten thousand from the noise they made.

When his soldiers couldn't get out of Tanzhou, the vice-minister grew frantic. He hastily ordered Chu Mingyu and Cao Mingji to open the water gate and seize the boats. Song Jiang's navel chieftains were lying motionless in the holds. As soon as the water gate opened, they pried up the deck boards and converted the craft into vessels of war.

On learning this, Ling Zhen fired a Blazing Wind cannon. The boats moored along either shore sailed forward to engage the enemy craft. From the left came Li Jun, Zhang Heng and Zhang Shun, rapidly plying their oars. From the right, the three Ruan brothers in their warships bore murderously down on the enemy boats.

Chu Mingyu and Cao Mingji realized they had fallen into an ambush. Hurriedly, they tried to beat a retreat. But it was too late. The Song fighters were already boarding their craft. They could only run for shore.

Song Jiang's six chieftains charged the water gate. They killed or drove off the defenders. The two Tartar generals fled for their lives. A torch waved atop the water gate, and Ling Zhen fired a Wagon cannon. Its projectile screamed across the sky.

Continuously the bombardment mounted, scaring the duke out of his wits. Black Whirlwind, Fan Rui and Bao Xu, leading Xiang Chong, Li Gun and their shield bearers, went tearing into the city.

The vice-minister and his general Yaor Weikang saw that all the gates had been taken and the Song troops were pouring in from every side.

They mounted and fled Tanzhou through the North Gate. Before they had gone two *li* they were intercepted by Guan Sheng the Big Halberd and Panther Head Lin Chong. The Tartar vice-minister and general had no choice but to give battle.

With a net spreading over Heaven and Earth, how could they escape? What, finally, was the vice-minister's fate? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 84
Song Jiang Attacks Qizhou City
Lu Junyi Battles in Yutian County

Vice-Minister Dongxian and Yaor Weikang had no stomach for a fight after a brief fierce encounter with Lin Chong and Guan Sheng. Desperately, they broke through at an angle and fled. Since it was Tanzhou they were after, the chieftains did not pursue but moved quickly instead into the city.

After the Song forces took Tanzhou and scattered the remaining Tartar troops, Song Jiang posted notices guaranteeing that the local population would not be harmed in the slightest. He directed that as many as possible of his war vessels should sail into the city, then rewarded his soldiers. As to the Tartar officials, those who had some prestige he kept on in their original positions. The remainder he pressured to leave the city and return to the desert. He sent a written report to the emperor on the conquest of Tanzhou, together with the valuables he had removed from the city's treasury. He wrote also to Marshal Su, requesting him to convey the news to the sovereign.

The emperor, on being informed, was delighted. He ordered that Zhao Anfu, a commissioner from the Council of Military Affairs, proceed at once

to the front with twenty thousand imperial cavalry troops.

Song Jiang and his chieftains, learning of Zhao's impending arrival, travelled a long distance from the city to meet him. They then escorted him to quarters in the prefectural residence, being used temporarily as the army's high command. All the generals came to pay their respects. Zhao Anfu, a direct descendant of the imperial Zhao family, was a man of benevolence and virtue who conducted his affairs in a correct and upright manner. It was this person, recommended by Marshal Su, that the emperor had chosen to oversee the military operations.

Zhao was very pleased to find Song Jiang such an honorable man. He said: “His Majesty is well aware how dedicated you and your officers and troops are. He has deputed me to supervise. He also sends you gifts of gold and silver and bolts of satin laden on twenty-five carts. I am to report to the throne the names of those who especially distinguish themselves and petition that they be awarded official rank. I shall also report again those prefectures and shires you have already taken. All of you commanders must do your utmost and cover yourselves with glory. When you return victorious to the capital, His Majesty will surely make important use of you.”

Song Jiang expressed thanks and said: “Can I trouble Your Excellency to take over control of Tanzhou? I propose to divide my forces and attack the other major prefectures of the Kingdom of Liao, so that the enemy won't be able to coordinate.”

He distributed the gifts among his officers, then called back all his troops and directed that they wait for orders regarding the forthcoming attack on the Tartar cites.

“Qizhou isn't far ahead,” said Yang Xiong. “Beyond that is a vast area rich in money and grain, rice and wheat. It's truly the Liao treasury. Conquer Qizhou and you can get the rest.”

Song Jiang thereupon requested his military advisor Wu Yong to confer with him.

Meanwhile, Vice-Minister Dongxian and Yaor Weikang, heading east, ran into Chu Mingyu and Cao Mingji and the remnants of their defeated army. Like a dog whose master has just died, like a fish which has escaped the net, they were scurrying along. All joined forces and hastened to the prefectural city of Qizhou. There they were received by Prince Yelu Dezhong, younger brother of the king. They told him of the large and mighty army commanded by Song Jiang, and of the remarkable barbarian stone thrower who flung his missiles with devastating accuracy and never missed. It was he who had killed the two royal nephews and General Aliqi.

“In that case you must help me destroy him,” said the prince.

Before the words were out of his mouth a roving scout entered and reported: “Song Jiang has divided his army into two columns and is attacking our prefecture. One column is advancing on Pinggu County, the other is moving against Yutian County.”

“Lead your troops to Pinggu,” the prince said to the vice-minister, “but don't engage the foe. I'll wipe out the barbarians at Yutian with my army, then slip around and come at the ones near Yutian from the rear. They won't be able to get away.”

He also notified the prefectures of Bazhou and Youzhou to send reinforcements immediately. He set out with a large army, accompanied by his four sons. They flew towards the beleaguered Yutian.

Commanding a column of thirty thousand men each, Song Jiang and Lu Junyi were advancing on the target county seats. When he neared Pinggu Song Jiang found the approaches firmly held. He did not venture to push on, but encamped west of the town.

Lu Junyi, with his force of thirty thousand strong, was soon within sight of the Tartar foe at Yutian. He conferred with his general Zhu Wu.

“I don't know this border area,” he said. “I'm not familiar with the terrain. How should we go about it?”

“In my humble opinion being strangers to these parts we should proceed cautiously. Spread our troops in a long curved-snake formation. If the enemy attacks our head, our tail can come to its aid. If our head is attacked, our tail can aid. If our middle is attacked, both head and tail can provide support. They won't be able to break any link in our circle. In that way we won't have to worry about being unfamiliar with the terrain.”

“My own feeling, exactly,” said Lu, very pleased. He ordered his troops to advance.

In the distance, they could see the Liao soldiers swarming towards them, like a dense dark fog, like rolling yellow sand dunes. Their black flags were rows of raven clouds, their fine steeds were charged with a lethal spirit. Their broad-brimmed hats of green felt were like lotus leaves stirred by the breeze in a thousand ponds, their iron helmets were ten thousand leagues of ocean seas gleaming dully neath the winter sun. Each buttoned his tunic on the left side, wore his hair down to his shoulders, and dressed in double chain mail over a thick tightly woven robe. Stalwart, dark complected men, they had green eyes and brown hair.

The Tartar cavalry were broad-shouldered, with waists of steel and legs of iron, and they rode excellent mounts. Their bows were tipped with rams' horns, their poplar arrows had been scoured with sand. Their broad tiger skin capes contrasted with their narrow saddles of incised leather. Raised in the border regions, they grew up skilled in weaponry. For generations they had been riding the most spirited horses. Their infantry marched to the blare of bronze trumpets and the throb of sheepskin drums, their cavalry played flutes and fifes as they cantered along.

Prince Dezhong arrived at Yutian and deployed his troops for battle. Zhu Wu climbed a “cloud ladder” to observe them. He came down and reported to Lu Junyi.

“The barbarians have spread out in a 'Five Tigers Backed by a Mountain' position. Nothing special,” said Zhu. He went up the ladder for another look.

Left and right he waved his signal flag, deploying the Song expeditionary forces. Lu watched, mystified.

“What battle position is this?”

“It's called 'Leviathan into Roc'.”

“How can a 'leviathan become a roc'?”

“In our North Sea we have a fish known as the white leviathan. It can turn itself into a roc and fly ninety thousand *li*. This battle position at first glance appears quite small. But as soon as the fighting starts it can expand enormously. That's why it's called 'Leviathan into Roc'.”

Lu Junyi heartily approved. Then the enemy's battle drums pounded, their pennant gate opened and the prince, the king's younger brother, rode forth together with his four sons, two on each side, all dressed alike. Small mirrors fringed by black tassels dangled from the young men's shoulders, and each carried a good sword and sat a swift horse. They reined in at the edge of the battlefield in a straight line. Behind the prince in deep ranks were many officers.

“How dare you marsh bandits invade our borders!” the sons shouted.

“The two armies are face to face,” said Lu to his chieftains. “Which of our heroes will be the first to do combat?”

Almost before the words were out of his mourn Guan Sheng the Big Halberd rode forward waving his big blade. The prince's son Zongyun, brandishing his sword, clapped his horse and galloped to meet him. Before they had fought five rounds, another son, Zonglin, joined in the fray.

At this, Huyan Zhuo, swinging his rods, quickly engaged him. The other two sons, Zongdian and Zonglei, raced forward, to be met by Xu Ning and Suo Chao. The four pairs clashed in a wild melee.

Featherless Arrow Zhang Qin, meanwhile, rode quietly to the edge of the field of combat. Soldiers of the Tartar force which had been defeated at

Tanzhou recognized him, and hurriedly reported to the prince.

“That savage in the green robe is the stone-thrower. He's coming close on his horse, and must be up to his old tricks!”

Tianshanyong, the famous Tartar bowman, overheard this and said: “Don't worry, Your Excellency. I'll give him a taste of my skill!” Tianshanyong used a painted crossbow and feathered iron bolts one foot long and shot from the saddle. His nickname was Drop of Oil.

Now he cocked the trigger and advanced stealthily, partly concealed by two Tartar officers who rode before him. But Zhang Qin caught sight of him, drew a stone from his pouch and flung it with a yell. It whizzed past the bowman's helmet. Tianshanyong slipped behind his horse's back and fitted a bolt to his crossbow. As soon as Zhang Qin was near enough, Tianshanyong fired.

“Aiya!” cried Zhang Qin. Hastily, he attempted to dodge. But the bolt struck him in the neck and knocked him from his saddle. General Two Spears and Nine Dragons Shi Jin, followed by Xie Zhen and Xie Bao, in a desperate rush, rescued him. The arrow was extracted, but a bandage around Zhang Qin's neck couldn't stop the flow of blood. Lu directed Zou Yuan and Zou Run to take him in a cart to Tanzhou and have him treated by the physician An Daoquan. They departed on the cart. Of that we'll say no more.

Shouts again rose at the front, and a scout reported: “A cavalry detachment is racing this way from the northwest. They don't respond to hails. They're just knocking everyone aside and plunging directly into the battlefield.”

With Zhang Qin hit in the neck by an arrow, Lu had not much eagerness for combat. The four chieftains pretended to be losing, and retreated to their own lines, pursued by the four Tartar princelings. Meanwhile, Liao attackers were smashing through from the northwest like an avalanche. Nothing could stop them. The Song forces, split into fragments, were unable to come to each other's aid.

Lu Junyi, alone with his one mount and single lance, fought past the enemy lines. It was dusk, and he ran into the four Tartar princelings who were just returning. Fearlessly he fought them all. Suddenly he executed a feint and Zonglin closed in, hacking with his sword. Lu froze him with a yell. Before Zonglin could recover his wits, Lu's lance stabbed him from his horse. The other three, startled and a bit frightened, rode quickly away. Lu dismounted, cut off his adversary's head and hung it on his steed's neck. Vaulting into the saddle, he proceeded south.

Encountering a unit of Liao troops, well over a thousand, he charged them so savagely they broke and ran. A few *li* further on, he saw another detachment. In the dark moonless night he couldn't at first tell who they were. But then he heard voices speaking in his own Song accents.

“Whose army is that?” he called.

Huyan Zhuo answered. Lu was delighted. He joined them.

“We were broken up by the Tartars, and couldn't help each other.” said Huyan. “The four princelings fought here with Han Tao and Peng Qi for a time. I don't know what became of them after that.”

“I killed one, and three ran away. Then I barged into over a thousand more, and scattered them. I never thought I'd meet you here.”

They all headed south. After travelling only about a dozen *li* they saw their path blocked by another detachment.

“We'd better wait till daylight,” said Huyan. “There's no use attacking in the dark.”

From the opposite side a voice sang out: “Is that you, General Huyan Zhuo?”

Huyan recognized the voice of Guan Sheng the Big Halberd. “Commander-in-Chief Lu is here too,” he shouted.

All the chieftains dismounted and sat down on the grass to confer. Lu and Huyan told what had happened to them, after which Guan Sheng spoke.

“We lost the initiative and couldn't come to each other's aid. I and Xuan Zan, Hao Siwen, Shan Tinggui and Wei Dingguo were riding around looking for a road, and ran into a thousand of our troops. When we got here it was dark. We don't know the terrain and were afraid of falling into an ambush. We decided to wait for daybreak before travelling on. I never expected to meet you, brother.”

The two units joined forces.

At dawn they wound their way south and once again reached Yutian town. They saw a body of men ahead, patrolling outside, and recognized General Two Spears Dong Ping and Metal Lancer Xu Ning. They had camped there after having been scattered by the Tartars.

“Hou Jian and Bai Sheng have gone to report to Song Jiang,” they said, “but we don't know where Xie Zhen, Xie Bao, Yang Lin and Shi Yong are.”

Lu ordered a count of those who had already arrived in Yutian, and found they were more than five thousand men short. He was quite disturbed. At mid-morning he was informed that the four missing chieftains had returned with over two thousand troops. Lu summoned the chieftains.

“We four managed to fight through and go deep into vital enemy territory,” said Xie Zhen. “But we lost the road and didn't know which way to turn. This morning we ran into the Tartars again and killed a whole slew of them. Only then were we able to get here.”

Lu ordered that the head of the princeling Zonglin be hung up on display in Yutian town, and rewarded the troops. Around dusk just as the men were preparing to rest, a young officer patrolling the roads entered and reported: “Liao soldiers are surrounding the town. We don't know how many.”

Startled, Lu took Yan Qing to the top of the town wall for a look. They saw gleaming torches for a depth of ten *li*. A junior officer pointed out the princeling Zongyun, riding a fiery steed and supervising troop movement.

Yan Qing said: “Yesterday they hit Zhang Qin with a sneak arrow. Today we'll return the compliment.”

He fitted an arrow to his bow and shot. The missile struck Zongyun on the bridge of his nose and knocked him from his saddle. His soldiers hastily rescued him. The Tartar troops retreated five *li*. Lu conferred with his generals in the town.

“They've pulled back a bit,” he said, “but they'll surely encircle us again in the morning. We'll be closed in tighter than an iron bucket. How are we going to get out?”

“Song Jiang would rescue us if he knew,” said Zhu Wu. “Striking from within and without, we could break the siege.”

Truly, they had gone from the den of tigers and dragons into a snare net covering earth and sky. Was it victory or defeat which lay in store for them?

They waited until daylight and saw that the Liao contingents had surrounded them on all sides without a crack. A cloud of dust arose in the southeast as tens of thousands of soldiers marched towards them. The chieftains stared.

“It must be Song Jiang with our army,” said Zhu Wu. “When he attacks south, we here will strike with our entire force!”

The opposing Tartars maintained the siege from mid-morning till mid-afternoon, but then they could withstand the flank attack no longer. They began pulling back from the perimeter of the town.

“After them,” cried Zhu Wu. “What are we waiting for!”

Lu directed that the four gates of the county town be opened and led his troops out in hot pursuit. They slaughtered the Tartars and scattered them like falling stars and scudding clouds. Song Jiang also chased the fleeing enemy a long distance. Only at daybreak did he sound the trumpets to regroup and enter the county town.

When all the Song troops had gathered, Lu announced an offensive against Qizhou. Twenty-three chieftains were left with Commissioner Zhao to defend Tanzhou. The remainder were divided between left and right columns. Forty-eight went with Song Jiang who commanded the left, thirty-seven with Lu Junyi who commanded the right.

Both armies would march on Qizhou simultaneously, Song Jiang's column from Pinggu, and Lu's column from Yutian. Zhao Anfu and the twenty-three chieftains held Tanzhou. Of that no more need be said.

Originally Prince Yelu Dezhong the Tartar king's younger brother was defending Qizhou with the aid of his four princeling sons, a dozen generals, and over a hundred thousand troops. His chief general was called Baomisheng. The second in command was Tianshanyong.

Song Jiang's troops had campaigned several arduous days in a row. Song saw that they were weary and ordered a temporary rest. For the assault on Qizhou he already had a plan. But first he dispatched a man to Tanzhou to inquire about Zhang Qin's arrow wound.

“The injury is superficial. Tell our highest leader not to worry,” was Dr. An's reply. “Once the pus is drained he'll recover quickly. But our soldiers are suffering from many ailments because of the heat. I've asked Commissioner Zhao to send Xiao Rang and Song Qing to the Eastern Capital to buy heat-stroke medicine in the Imperial Hospital. Huangfu Duan, our veterinary, wants medicine for our horses. They will attend to that, too.”

Very pleased, Song Jiang consulted with Lu regarding the attack on Qizhou. “I had this plan before I knew you were surrounded at Yutian,” he said. “Gongsun Sheng is a native of Qizhou, Yang Xiong used to be a bailiff in the local government, and Shi Xiu and Shi Qian both lived there for a long time. The other day when we defeated the Tartars, I instructed Shi Xiu and Shi Qian to mix with the remnants of their army and retreat with them into the town. Once they get there they'll have a place to stay.

“Shi Qian said to me: 'In Qizhou there's a big temple called the Baoyan Monastery. Its vestibule houses scriptures and precious objects. In the

center of the compound is a magnificent hall, and in front of this is a fine tower that pierces the clouds.' And Shi Xiu said: 'I've told him to hide on the roof of the vestibule. I'll bring him food every day. For calls or nature he'll just have to wait till dark. As soon as you and our troops assault the town he'll set fire to the top of the tower.' Shi Qian is a veteran roof-climber and wall-sealer. He won't have any trouble concealing himself. When the time comes he'll put the prefectural government offices to the torch. They've talked it over and have already gone. I'm mobilizing our attack forces."

The next day, Song Jiang and his soldiers quit Pinggu County and joined Lu and his men. Together, they marched on Qizhou.

Meanwhile, the prince was raging over the loss of two of his sons. He conferred with his chief generals Baomisheng, Tianshanyong and the Vice-Minister Dongxian.

"Last time the relief columns from Zhuozhou and Bazhou both advanced widely spread out," he said. "But now Song Jiang has concentrated his forces at Yulian. Sooner or later he'll attack Qizhou. What are we going to do?"

"I'd have nothing against those barbarians if they hadn't invaded," said Baomisheng. "But since they have, I must fight them as enemies. I'm going out and capture a few. Otherwise, they'll never leave!"

"One of them wears a green robe and is fantastically good at throwing stones," said the vice-minister. "Be careful of him."

"I hit him in the neck with an arrow," said Tianshanyong. "He's probably dead."

"Except for that fellow," said the vice-minister, "the others don't matter."

A junior officer entered and said: "Song Jiang's army is rushing towards Qizhou."

The prince hastily mustered his troops and flew out to engage the foe. Thirty *li* from the town the opposing contingents met, and both deployed in

battle positions. Baomisheng, his long lance held athwart, rode forth.

“Who will break him, seize his banner, and win the first distinction?” queried Song Jiang.

Before the words had left his mouth, Panther Head Lin Chong was in the field, contending with the Tartar general. They fought over thirty rounds, with neither the victor. Lin Chong wanted to be the first to distinguish himself. He closed in with his eighteen-foot lance and its snake-shaped point. Uttering a thunderous roar, he brushed aside his opponent's weapon and thrust into Baomisheng's neck. The Tartar general fell from his horse.

Song Jiang was very pleased. Both armies yelled. Tianshanyong rode forward next. From Song Jiang's ranks Xu Ning emerged to meet him, bearing a sickle-bladed lance. The two had fought less than twenty rounds when a thrust from Xu Ning brought his opponent tumbling to the ground.

Two generals vanquished in a row! Song Jiang was delighted. He waved his army into action. The Liao Tartars, frightened by the death of two top commanders, fled towards Qizhou. Song Jiang's forces pursued them a dozen *li* or so, then pulled back.

That night they set up camp and Song Jiang rewarded the troops. The following day they struck camp and headed for Qizhou. On the third day the prince, having lost two senior generals, grew very nervous when informed that Song Jiang's army was approaching. He hastily gave instructions to Vice-Minister Dongxian.

“Go out there and meet the foe! Take some of the pressure off us!”

The vice-minister couldn't very well refuse. He set forth with Yaor Weikang, Chu Mingyu, Cao Mingji and a thousand soldiers and deployed outside the town walls.

Song Jiang's contingents drew near and assumed a goose-wing formation. Their pennant gate opened and Suo Chao cantered forward, holding a large battle-ax. Yaor Weikang sped out from the Tartar ranks, lance in hand.

They met and fought for more than twenty rounds. The Tartar began to lose courage, and with it his taste for combat. He longed to get away. From the top of the town wall the prince saw him turn his steed and start for the Tartar position. But Suo Chao caught up, raised his big ax, and brought it down on Yaor Weikang's skull, cleaving it in two.

The vice-minister ordered Chu Mingyu and Cao Mingji to rush into the fray. They were both eight-tenths scared, but since they couldn't get out of it they advanced with their lances.

Nine Dragons Shi Jin, brandishing his sword, emerged to take on the two of them. Shi Jin was a great warrior. One sweep of his blade hacked Chu Mingyu from his saddle. Cao Mingji tried to flee, but Shi Jin caught up and, with another swing of his sword, cut him to the ground. Then he galloped directly into the Tartar position.

Song Jiang pointed with his whip, and his men rushed the drawbridge. In an ever-deepening gloom the prince ordered that all the gates be shut and every general take a stand on top of the walls. He sent a hurried report to the king, and dispatched emissaries to Bazhou and Youzhou requesting immediate assistance.

“They've locked the town up tight,” Song Jiang said to Wu Yong. “What should we do?”

“We've got Shi Xiu and Shi Qian in there. They'll stay as long as necessary. Prepare scaling ladders and cannon on four sides for the attack. Have Ling Zhen launch an artillery bombardment first. If we hit them hard they're sure to crack.”

“Precisely what I was thinking.” Song Jiang ordered an offensive that very night.

The assault was intense. The prince directed that the entire populace man the walls. Shi Xiu, who for several days had been hiding in the Baoyan Monastery, bad been growing impatient at the lack of action. Now Shi Qian came to him excitedly.

“Brother Song Jiang is hitting the town hot and heavy. There'll never be a better time for setting those fires!”

They made their plans. Shi Qian would first put the top of the tower to the torch, then the monastery hall. “You burn the government offices,” said Shi Qian. “When our forces at the South Gate see all these important places ablaze they'll strike even harder. They'll crack this town wide open!”

Both set out with powder, flint and steel, pipe length and coal, concealed on their persons. By nightfall Song Jiang's troops were assailing the town relentlessly.

The nimble Shi Qian could skim along eaves and skip over walls as easily as on level ground. He soon had the top of the tower in flames. Since it was the highest point around, the blaze could be seen plainly inside the town and out for a distance of over thirty *li*, like a fiery gimlet. Then Shi Qian ignited the monastery hall.

These two fires threw the town into an uproar. Among the citizenry, old and young panicked, boys cried, girls wept, and all ran for their lives. At this moment Shi Xiu climbed to the top of the government office and set it ablaze. The authorities realized the enemy had concealed agents at work. What did the populace care about defending the town walls? Nobody could stop them. They dashed off to look after their homes. Soon the monastery was also in flames. On the way out, Shi Qian had put it to the torch.

Four or five fires in less than half a watch told the prince that Song Jiang had operatives in the town. Hurriedly, he mustered some troops, took his wife and two children, loaded a cart, opened the North Gate and left.

Qizhou was in great confusion. Song Jiang urged his men to drive harder. Murderous yells rose inside the town and out. The attackers captured the South Gate. Vice-Minister Dongxian knew he couldn't hang on alone. He departed in the wake of the prince through the North Gate.

Song Jiang and his army surged into Qizhou. First, he had the fires extinguished. At daybreak, he posted notices reassuring the populace. He billeted as many of his troops as possible inside the town and issued them

rewards. The achievements of Shi Qian and Shi Xiu were recorded in the distinguished conduct book for officers. Song Jiang sent a written dispatch to Zhao Anfu.

“We have taken the large prefecture of Qizhou. We would be pleased to have Your Excellency move your quarters here.”

To which the commissioner wrote a reply: “I shall remain in Tanzhou temporarily, while Vanguard General Song Jiang holds Qizhou. Due to the severe summer heat, this is not a good time to shift troops. We can discuss this again when the weather is somewhat cooler.”

Song Jiang then instructed Lu Junyi to encamp with his forces in Yutian County. The remainder of the army would occupy Qizhou. When the weather cooled, new orders would be given.

Meanwhile, Prince Yelu Dezhong and Vice-Minister Dongxian, together with their wives and children, fled to Youzhou. From there they went to Yanjing to report to the king. The monarch of the Liao Tartars was seated in his Golden Hall. Before him his civil and military officials stood in ranks. Court was just concluding.

The privy councellor announced: “The prince has arrived from Qizhou and awaits an audience.”

The king immediately had them summoned. On entering the hall the prince and the minister prostrated themselves before the throne and wept aloud.

“Don't distress yourself, dear brother,” said the king. “Whatever it is, tell me all about it.”

“The Song emperor has sent an expeditionary army under Song Jiang against us. They're very strong. We can't seem to stop them. They've killed two of my sons and four Tanzhou generals. Then they rolled on and took Qizhou. We've come to Your Majesty to request death!”

“Rise, sirs,” said the king. “We must talk this over. Who, after all, is this barbarian, Song Jiang? Just a bandit!”

Marshal Chu Jian the vice-premier came forward and explained. “I've heard about this fellow. Originally he was a bandit in a stronghold in Liangshan Marsh. But he never hurt good, ordinary folk, and sought always to act on Heaven's behalf. He killed only corrupt officials who harmed the people. Tong Guan and Gao Qiu led armies against him, but he completely smashed them in only five battles. No one has been able to arrest the gallant men in his band. Three times the emperor sent him offers of amnesty. Finally, he surrendered. He's been appointed vanguard general of the expeditionary force, but has not been given any official rank. The rest of his chieftains have no status either. These are the men who have been dispatched to slaughter us. I hear there are a hundred and eight of them, and each corresponds to a star in Heaven. They are formidable foes. Don't underestimate them, Your Majesty!”

“In view of what you say, what should we do?” exclaimed the king.

His elegant gown sweeping the floor, Minister Ouyang stepped forward confidently. “Long live Your Majesty,” he said. “A son should be filial, a minister should be loyal. Although I am without talent, I have a small plan for driving back the Song invaders.”

The king was pleased. “If you have any good suggestions, let's hear them.”

Ouyang was brief, and as a result Song Jiang won great distinction, his name was inscribed in history, his deeds in the royal records. His forces returned from the border singing paeans of victory, beating time on their stirrups with their whips. Truly, their skill in defending their country vied with Lu Wang's, their righteous merit exceeded that of Zhang Liang.

What, then, was the proposal of Ouyang of the Kingdom of Liao? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 85
Song Jiang at Night Crosses Yijin Pass
Wu Yong by a Ruse Captures Wenan Town

Ouyang explained, “Song Jiang and his band are bold gallants from Liangshan Marsh. But the emperor of Song today is manipulated by Cai

Jing, Tong Guan, Gao Qiu and Yang Jian. These four crooked ministers are jealous of real talent and block righteous conduct. If you're not their intimate you can't advance, if you don't give them money they don't want you. They'll never permit the Song Jiang faction to exist for long. In my humble opinion, Your Majesty should grant him high rank, bestow on him gold and silks, fine furs and horses. I'll be glad to go as your emissary and urge him to serve our great Liao kingdom. If he and his chieftains join us, Your Majesty can take the Central Plain as easily as turning over your hand! I beg you to consider!”

“What you say is quite true,” mused the king. “You shall be my emissary. Take with you a hundred and eight fine saddle horses and a hundred and eight bolts of the best silk. Tell Song Jiang that he shall be a Grand General, the Supreme Commander of our Liao soldiery. As a sign of our faith in him, he shall also have a bountiful gift of gold and silver. Write down the names of the chieftains. They too shall be given official rank.”

From the attending ranks Wuyan, the commander-in-chief, stepped forward and addressed the throne. “Why amnesty Song Jiang and his gang of petty bandits?” he cried. “I have under my command twenty-eight star-blest generals and eleven Heaven-guided officers. With our powerful army and bold commanders, what have we to fear? If the barbarians refuse to withdraw, I'll lead our troops personally and slaughter the lot!”

“You're a splendid warrior, a winged tiger, true,” said the king. “But if we add them to our forces, your wings will be doubled. Don't try to prevent it.”

After this rebuff, no one else dared speak. Wuyan was the country's leading general, versed in all eighteen branches of military art, an excellent strategist and tactician. Around thirty-five, tall and stalwart, he had a fair complexion and rosy lips, brown hair and green eyes, and was possessed of matchless courage and strength. In battle he used a long iron lance flecked with steel, and when in the thick of combat the iron slabs at his waist clanked fearsomely. Truly a formidable fighter!

On receipt of the governmental decree, Ouyang assembled the many gifts, mounted his horse and proceeded towards Qizhou where Song Jiang was resting his troops. Informed that a Liao emissary was approaching, Song

didn't know whether this boded good or evil. He brought out the Books of the Mystic Maid and cast divining sticks. They fell in a pattern auguring great good fortune.

He told Wu Yong about the omen and said: “It probably means the Liao emissary will offer us an amnesty. What should we do?”

“If that is so, we can match their plan with one of our own. Accept it. Let Lu Junyi hang on to Qizhou, then take Bazhou prefecture. Once we've got Bazhou, the Liao kingdom is sure to crack. Tanzhou we already have. First become a high general of the Liao kingdom. The rest will be simple. Do the difficult things first and the easy things later. Don't let them suspect.”

When Minister Ouyang arrived at the town, Song Jiang ordered that the gate be opened and the Tartar official be allowed to enter. Ouyang dismounted in front of the prefectural office and went directly to the main hall. Ceremonial greetings were exchanged. Host and guest took their seats.

“What brings you here, sir?”

“There is small matter. Could I speak to Your Excellency alone?”

Song Jiang directed his chieftains to withdraw. He led his visitor to a secluded room in the rear. Ouyang bowed.

“Our Liao kingdom has long known of your fame, General. Because of the vast distance between us, unfortunately we never had the opportunity to view your noble countenance. We have heard, too, that when you were in your mountain stronghold you acted always in Heaven's behalf, and that you and your brother chieftains were of one heart. Today, in the Song court evil ministers block the path of righteousness. If you dispense bribes among them you can obtain high office and important duties. If you don't, even though you do great deeds for your country, you are kept in obscurity and never rise in rank. This wicked clique holds power. They slander the upright, are jealous of ability, make no distinction between what is worthy of reward and what deserves punishment, and have sown confusion throughout the land. Bandits run wild south of the Yangzi, on both sides of

the Zhejiang River and in the provinces of Shandong and Hebei. The people are so despoiled by them they can barely sustain themselves.

“Out of a desire to serve your emperor loyally, you surrendered with a hundred thousand crack troops. But you were given only the position of a mere vanguard general, and have not been elevated to official rank. Nor has any rank been granted to your brother chieftains, despite their devoted efforts to serve their country. Although you have led your army into the desert, suffered privations and performed meritorious deeds, the imperial court has bestowed no rewards. This is all due to the schemes of the wicked monsters. Only by sending whatever plunder you may acquire to Cai Jing, Tong Guan, Gao Qiu and Yang Jian can you be sure of attaining official rank and winning royal favor. Should you fail to do this, no matter how faithfully you perform and how conspicuously you distinguish yourself, when you return to the capital you will be branded a traitor.

“I have been dispatched as the emissary of the king of Great Liao to inform you of His Majesty's desire to designate you his Grand General and Supreme Commander of the Liao soldiery, and to present you with gold and silver plus a hundred and eight bolts of silk and a hundred and eight fine mounts. I am also to write down the names of all one hundred and eight of you so that official titles may be bestowed. I have no wish to cajole you, General. I am here because our king, who has long known of your virtue, has deputed me to invite you and your chieftains to accept an amnesty and submit to his rule.”

Song Jiang heard him out, then replied. “What you have said, sir, is very true. Because I was born of mean estate and was just a petty functionary in Yuncheng City I had to flee after committing a crime and take temporary refuge in Liangshan Marsh. Yet the Song emperor offered me an amnesty three times, and finally pardoned my crimes. Although my position is lowly and I have not yet performed any meritorious deeds, I would like to repay the emperor for his kindness in forgiving me. The Liao king wishes to grant me high rank and present me with valuable gifts. I dare not accept. Please take them back. Since it is now the heat of summer, I have ordered my army to rest and have borrowed two of your monarch's towns to quarter them in. Let's wait until the cool of autumn. Then we can discuss this again.”

“If you don't scorn them as too trivial, General, at least accept the gifts. I will come for another talk later on.”

“You must realize there are a lot of eyes and ears among the hundred and eight of us. If word of this leaks out, there will be trouble.”

“But power is firmly in your hands. Who would dare disobey?”

“You don't understand. The majority of my chieftains are fearless straight-forward warriors. Better let me prepare them. When we're all agreed, there'll be time enough to give you an answer.”

After wining and dining Ouyang, Song Jiang saw him out of the town. The emissary mounted and left. Song Jiang told Wu Yong what had transpired.

“What shall I do?”

Wu Yong sighed, head down, but did not reply.

“Why do you sigh, Military Advisor?”

“I've been wondering. Since you place loyalty first, I'm afraid to say too much. It seems to me there's a great deal of truth in Minister Ouyang's statements. Our Song emperor, though noble and intelligent, has lost much of his power to Cai Jing, Tong Guan, Gao Qiu and Yang Jian. What's more, he trusts them. Even if we distinguish ourselves, there's no assurance we'll be elevated. After three amnesty offers you, our leader, have been given only the empty title of Vanguard General. In my humble opinion going over to the Tartars at least would be better than maintaining a fortress in Mount Liangshan. Of course it might violate your sense of loyalty.”

“You're badly mistaken! Going over to the Tartars is out of the question! Even if the Song Dynasty wrongs me, I can't wrong the Song Dynasty. I may not receive any rewards, but I'll leave behind a clean name. Heaven will not forgive me if I turn traitor! We ought to be loyal and serve our country unto death.”

“Since that's how you feel, brother, we can use this opportunity to take Bazhou. But we'll have to rest our soldier and horses temporarily because of the summer heat.”

The two reached agreement, but they didn't tell the other chieftains. They remained in Qizhou waiting for the heat to pass.

While chatting with Gongsun Sheng the following day Song Jiang said: “I've often heard you speak of your teacher Luo the Sage as a lofty scholar of a prosperous era. That time we attacked Gaotang Prefecture, and I sent Dai Zong and Li Kui to request your aid in countering Gao Lian's magic, you mentioned that Luo the Sage's occult skill was extremely effective. Could I trouble you, brother, to take me to his temple so that I may burn incense and pray, and wash the earthly dust from my soul? Would that suit you?”

“I've been thinking about going home to see my old mother and paying my respects to my old teacher at the same time. But I saw you were busy settling down our troops, and didn't dare ask. I was going to request leave today. It never occurred to me that you would want to go, too. We can start tomorrow morning. I'll present you to my teacher and go visit my mother.”

The next day Song Jiang turned over command of the army to his military advisor, and prepared famous incense, fresh fruit, gold and jewels and fine silks. Together with Hua Rong, Dai Zong, Lu Fang, Guo Sheng, Yan Shun and Ma Lin, he and Gongsun set out for Two Fairies Mountain in Jiugong County at the head of five thousand infantry.

Astride their horses, the chieftains rode deep into the mountains. Green pines mantled the slopes, and the air was cool and clear. The summer heat was left far behind. Truly, mountains of great beauty. Gongsun pointed.

“That is called 'Fish Snout Mountain.'”

Gongsun led Song Jiang to the Temple of Purple Shades where all dismounted and straightened their clothes. A junior officer carrying the incense and gifts, they proceeded to the Crane Pavilion. Taoist priests greeted Gongsun and Song Jiang respectfully.

“'Where is my teacher?” Gongsun asked.

“For the past few days the master has been meditating in the rear,” replied the priest. “He hasn't been seeing anyone and seldom comes to the temple.”

With Song Jiang, Gongsun followed a hilly winding path behind the temple towards the sage's retreat. Before they had gone a *li*, they saw a fence of brambles. Outside it were green pines and cypress, within were pretty shrubs and flowers. In the center were three connected snow caverns. It was here that Luo the Sage read scriptures.

An acolyte, seeing them arrive, opened the gate and came out. Gongsun entered a thatched shack in front of the Crane Pavilion and kowtowed before his teacher, Luo the Sage.

“Song Jiang, my old friend from Shandong, has received an amnesty. By imperial order, he leads an army against the Liao, and has already reached Qizhou. Today, he has come specially to pay you his respects.”

Luo directed that he be invited in. As Song Jiang entered, Luo came down from the dais to greet him. Song Jiang begged Luo to be seated so that he might kowtow before him.

“You are a mighty minister of our state, General,” protested the Taoist, “with gold at your waist and purple in your clothes. You're on a mission for His Majesty. I'm only a poor rustic priest. How do I dare?”

But Song Jiang insisted, and Luo finally sat down. Song Jiang first placed the fine incense in the burner and lit it, then he kowtowed eight times. He summoned Hua Rong and the other chieftains, and they did the same.

Luo asked them all to be seated and instructed his acolyte to serve tea and fruit. After making a few polite inquiries about their journey, the Sage addressed himself to Song Jiang.

“You correspond to a star of Heavenly Spirit, General, you're famed throughout the Central Plain, you're surrounded by other Star Spirits, and together you act in Heaven's behalf. Recently you have submitted to the rule

of the Song court, for which virtuous deed you shall be remembered for countless generations.

“My pupil Gongsun Sheng I introduced into our order personally, and he shunted off earthly interests and devoted himself to truth. Subsequently, he had no choice but to join you, since he too was a spirit descended from a star. Today you have deigned to visit me, General. I am not worthy. Please overlook my faults.”

“I was just a petty functionary in Yuncheng, and had to run away to the mountains because I committed a crime. Fortunately, heroic companions came like the wind from every direction. We're of one voice, one breath, as close as bone and flesh, limbs of the same body. Only after Heaven sent a sign did we know that we were united as stars of Heavenly Spirits and Earthly Fiends.

“Three times the Song emperor granted us amnesty and forgave our crimes, and my chieftains joined me in submitting to imperial rule. I have been put in command of an expeditionary force against the Liao. Since we were passing your holy place, I thought I might take advantage of this lucky chance to offer my respects. If you could tell me what lies ahead, sir Sage, I would consider myself infinitely fortunate.”

“Stay a while, General. Have a vegetarian meal with me. It's getting late. Spend the night in our crude thatched shelter and go back in the morning. What do you say?”

“I'm longing to have you unravel the mystery, Teacher. Only then will I be able to go on with peace of mind.” At Song Jiang's signal, his retainers proffered the gold and jewels and silks to Luo the Sage.

“I'm an old man living quietly in a rustic retreat,” said the Taoist. “I have no use for riches. A cloth gown to cover my body is good enough. I have never worn silks. As a commander of whole armies you have to spend thousands every day, General. Take back your gifts. Use them for your soldiers. I have no need for such things. I'll just keep the platters of fruit.”

Song Jiang again kowtowed and begged Luo to accept, but the old man was adamant. A vegetarian meal was served. When they had finished eating, they drank tea. Luo told Gongsun to go home and see his mother.

“Come back early in the morning and accompany the general back to the city,” he admonished.

That evening Luo chatted with his visitor. Song Jiang told in detail what was troubling him, and pleaded for a prophecy.

“You have a loyal heart, General, and you act in conformity with Heaven's will. God will surely protect you. Some day you will be entitled a noble. Have no doubt, after your death sacrifices will be made to your spirit in a temple. But in life your future is rather dim. It's far from perfect.”

“Do you mean, Teacher, that I won't come to a good end?”

“Oh, no. You'll die in your bed, and be buried in a proper grave. It's just that in your life there are many abrasions among the smooth, more sorrows than joys. When you're at the height of your success, you should pull back a bit. Don't strive too long for wealth and rank.”

“Such things have never been my desire. I want only to be together always with my brothers. If I can have that, I'll be content though I live in poverty. My sole wish is peace and happiness for all.”

Luo the Sage smiled. “When the final parting comes, who of us can hope to stay!”

Song Jiang bowed and begged him for a prophecy. The old Taoist directed his acolyte to bring paper and pen. Then he wrote this eight-phrase prophecy and handed it to Song Jiang:

Few are the loyal,

Rare are true friends.

Success in the Northland

Is but the moon's sickly glow.

At winter's start

The geese fly away.

When dynasties change

Old titles must go.

Song Jiang didn't understand. He bowed to the Sage and said: “Please explain, Teacher. What's the meaning of this riddle?”

“It's decree from Heaven and cannot be revealed. When the time comes, you will know. The night is dark and the hour is late. Please return to the temple, General. We'll meet again in the morning. Some years ago I received something while asleep. I want to enter that dream again so that I can return it. Forgive me, General.”

Concealing the eight-phrase prophecy on his person, Song Jiang took his leave of the sage and went back to the temple. The Taoist priests conducted him to their meditation hall, and there he spent the night.

Early the next morning, he again went to call on Luo the Sage. Gongsun was already waiting in the thatched shack. Luo had a vegetarian breakfast served. When it was over, he addressed Song Jiang.

“I have a request. My pupil Gongsun's mundane pursuits are only temporary. His destiny is to follow the Way. But if he remains here now to look after me, he'll be neglecting his brothers. I'll let him go with you, General, and achieve great merit. But when you return to the capital and report your victory to the throne, I hope you will allow him to come back here. Thus he will be able first to carry on the Way and then end his mother's constant longing. I have no doubt that as a gallant warrior,

General, you behave in a righteous manner. I wonder whether you would be willing to accept my suggestion?”

“Teacher's word is my command! Whether brother Gongsun remains with me is up to him. I wouldn't dare interfere.”

Luo the Sage and Gongsun Sheng in a pious gesture placed their palms together before their faces. “We thank you, General,” they said, “for your golden promise.”

The chieftains bid farewell to Luo. He saw them to the outside of the retreat. “Look after yourself, General. May we hear soon of your being entitled!”

Song Jiang bowed and departed. The horses had been fed and groomed, and were waiting for him and his chieftains in front of the monastery. The Taoist priests saw them off to the outskirts of the temple grounds, and there bid them farewell. The Visitors led their steeds to a level halfway down the slope. Then all mounted and rode back to Qizhou.

The journey was uneventful. They dismounted in front of the municipal government office in the center of town. Li Kui the Black Whirlwind was there to greet them.

“You went to see Luo the Sage,” he said. “Why didn't you take me along?”

“Luo claims you tried to kill him. He's got it in for you.”

“He gave me a hard enough time!”

Everybody laughed.

Song Jiang entered the government compound, and they all went to a hall in the rear. He showed the eight-phrase prophecy to Wu Yong, but no one could decipher it.

“Brother,” said Gongsun, “this is a mystic decree from Heaven. Its meaning is not intended to be clear. Put it away, it will serve you all your life. Don't

try to guess. Remember what my teacher said—when the time comes, you will know."

Song Jiang acceded to Gongsun's advice. He placed the decree inside the Three Heavenly Books for safekeeping. The army remained in Qizhou for the next month or more. There were no military developments.

In the latter half of the seventh lunar month a dispatch arrived from Commissioner Zhao in Tanzhou. He said the imperial court had sent a directive urging an offensive. Song Jiang talked it over with Wu Yong. They went first to Yutian and met with Lu Junyi and the others. They held practice maneuvers, got the weapons in order, and settled deployment details. Then they returned to Qizhou, offered sacrifices to their flags, and chose an suspicious day for setting forth.

At this moment an attendant announced: "An emissary from the Kingdom of Liao."

Song Jiang went out to receive him. It was Minister Ouyang. He was invited to the rear, and courtesies were exchanged.

"What brings you here, Minister?"

"I prefer to speak to you alone."

Song Jiang dismissed his orderlies.

"The King of Great Liao has exceeding admiration for your virtue, General. If you come over, he will surely be moved to give you rank and titles. But that is of relatively small import. What matters is that you join us early so that His Majesty may not be kept in suspense."

"No one else is here, I can speak freely. The last time you called, my chieftains all guessed your purpose. Half of them are not willing to submit. If I go to Youzhou Prefecture with you to visit the king, Lu Junyi, my Vice Vanguard General, is certain to pursue me with troops. And if we battle there outside the town, the old fraternal feeling among my brothers will come to nought! I must first take refuge in some city—it doesn't matter

which—with some of my trusted cohorts. Then, if Lu learns what I've done, and comes after me, I can stay out of his way. If he refuses to take my advice, I can still fight him. If he doesn't know, and returns to the Eastern Capital, I'm going to have trouble anyway. But by then I will have seen the king. I'll have time enough to go forth at the head of a Great Liao army and engage the foe."

Very pleased, Ouyang said: "We're not far from Bazhou. There are only two approaches to it. One is called Yijin Pass. It's flanked by high steep cliffs, and through it runs a post road. The other is called Wenan Pass, and it also has ugly heights on either side. Beyond this is the county town. There two passes are the gateways to Bazhou from the flanks. You can, if you wish, take shelter in Bazhou. The city is ruled by Kangli Dingan, the king's brother-in-law. You can stay with him, General, and see what develops here."

"In that case, I'll send people to my home immediately to fetch my father, so that he won't be caught. You may dispatch men to me secretly, Minister, to lead the way. I'll start preparing tonight."

Ouyang was very happy. He bid Song Jiang farewell, left the government compound, mounted his horse and departed.

Song Jiang summoned Lu Junyi, Wu Yong and Zhu Wu to Qizhou, and they evolved a ruse for taking Bazhou. Lu then returned, and Wu Yong and Zhu Wu gave secret instructions to the other chieftains. With fourteen of these Song Jiang readied a force often thousand. Now, they had only to wait for Minister Ouyang to reappear.

Two days later Ouyang came again at a gallop. "The king of Great Liao is convinced of your good intentions," he announced to Song Jiang. "With you on our side what have we to fear of the Song army! His Majesty will also be supported by cavalry from Yuyang and infantry from Shanggu. Since you're worried about your father we're sending people to invite him to Bazhou. He and the king's brother-in-law can keep each other company."

"The chieftains who are willing to go with me are all prepared. When shall we start?"

“Tonight. Please issue your orders.”

Song Jiang directed that to ensure silence every metal part of the horses' equipment be muffled and that the men march with wooden gags in their mouths. They would be leaving that very night. He entertained the emissary until dusk, then he ordered that the town's West Gate be opened.

Ouyang led the way with a few dozen horsemen. Song Jiang and a body of troops followed. When they had gone something over twenty *li* Song Jiang suddenly uttered a cry of dismay.

“Aiya! I arranged with Wu Yong, my military advisor, to go over to the Great Liao together. We left in such a hurry, I didn't wait for him. Let's slow down a bit, and send someone to get him.”

Around midnight, the gate of Yijin Pass loomed before them. Minister Ouyang shouted a command.

“Open the gate!”

The officer in charge complied. The army marched through and continued on to Bazhou. Shortly before dawn Ouyang invited Song Jiang to enter the city. Kangli Dingan, the king's brother-in-law, was notified of their arrival. Brother of the queen, he was extremely influential. What's more, he was possessed of remarkable courage. Serving under him in the defense of Bazhou were two ministers. One was called Jinfu, the other Yeqing.

When he heard that Song Jiang had come to surrender, Dingan ordered that the army camp outside the city, and that only Vanguard General Song Jiang be allowed to enter. Ouyang led Song Jiang into the presence of the Royal Brother-in-Law. Impressed by his handsome appearance, Dingan came down from the dais to greet him. After courtesies were exchanged in the Rear Hall, Dingan invited him to be seated.

“The Royal Brother-in-Law is a tree of gold branches and jade leaves, while I am only a small officer who surrenders. How dare I accept such ceremony? How can I ever repay?”

“Your fame as conqueror of the Central Plain is known throughout the land. You have won the admiration of our Liao king. He will surely make important use of you.”

“Basking in your reflected glory, Royal Brother-in-Law, I shall do my utmost to display my gratitude for His Majesty's vast beneficence.” Very pleased, Dingan ordered that a feast of congratulations be laid for Song Jiang, and that cows and horses be slaughtered to feted his soldiers. A house was provided in which Song Jiang and Hua Rong and the others could stay. Only then were the troops allowed into the city. The chieftains paid their respects to the Royal Bother-in-Law and the Tartar generals, then joined Song Jiang in their special quarters.

Song Jiang sent for Ouyang and said: “Would you please notify the officials at the pass gates to let Wu Yong through when he arrives. He will live here with me. I forgot about him last night, we travelled so quickly. Wu Yong is indispensable to me in major military affairs. He's equally adept in civil matters, and he knows every aspect of strategy and tactics.”

Ouyang sent word to both Yijin and Wenan: Should a scholarly looking gentleman named Wu Yong appear, let him in.

From atop the gate at Yijin Pass the official in charge saw a huge cloud of dust stretching from earth to sky. It heralded the approach of a large army. The official primed his cannons and prepared to engage the foe.

In front of the mountain a lone horseman appeared. He looked like a scholar. With him, on foot, were a monk and a pilgrim. They were followed by about a dozen villagers. All hurried towards the gate. The horseman drew rein before it and raised his voice in a shout.

“I am Song Jiang's military advisor Wu Yong. I'm trying to find him. The Song troops are hot on my heels! You must open the gate and save me!”

“That's the man, all right,” thought the official. He ordered that the gate be opened to admit Wu Yong. The monk and the pilgrim promptly barged in with him. Soldiers at the entrance tried to stop them. The pilgrim was well inside by now.

“We are two men who have spurned the material world,” cried the monk. “The Song troops are on our trail. Please save us!”

Soldiers attempted to push them out. The monk and pilgrim lost their tempers. “We're not monks at all,” they yelled. “We're Sagacious Lu and Wu Song the Lords of Slaughter!”

The Tattooed Monk began swinging his iron staff, cracking every skull he encountered. The Pilgrim wielded his pair of swords, killing soldiers like slicing melons and cutting vegetables. The dozen “villagers” were actually all chieftains. They rushed the gate and took it over. Lu Junyi and his army then poured through the pass into Wenan County. The officials at the gate couldn't stem the tide. The entire county soon fell to the attackers.

Wu Yong galloped to the walls of Bazhou. The officials at the gate reported his arrival. Song Jiang and Minister Ouyang went to meet him and led him to the presence of the Royal Brother-in-Law.

“I was a bit late getting started,” Wu Yong explained. “I hadn't expected Lu Junyi to hear about my leaving the town. He came tearing after me, and chased me as far as the pass. Now I've reached this city. I don't know what Lu did after I escaped him.”

Just then a mounted comet scout entered and reported: “The Song army has captured Wenan County and is heading this way!”

The Royal Brother-in-Law mustered troops and prepared to go out and meet the foe. “You needn't do that,” said Song Jiang. “Wait till Lu reaches our walls. I'll try to persuade him to come over. If he doesn't agree, there'll still be time to fight him.”

Another mounted scout reported: “They're not far from the city now.”

Dingan the Royal Brother-in-Law and Song Jiang mounted the walls for a look. They saw the Song troops deployed in neat ranks outside the city. Lu Junyi, in helmet and armor, grasping his lance astride a spirited steed, was positioning his forces. An imposing martial figure, he reined in beneath his gate of pennants.

“Let Song Jiang, the opposer of the imperial court, come out,” he shouted.

Standing in the ramparts beneath the watch tower, Song Jiang called back: “Brother, the Song court makes no distinction between what should be punished and what should be rewarded. Slanderers and intriguers hold power. I have already gone over to the king of Great Liao. Come and help me. Let's both support the king. Don't forget the many days we were together in Liangshan Marsh.”

“I had a happy family and a prosperous business in the Northern Capital when you inveigled me up the mountain! Three times the Song emperor offered us amnesties. He's been more than kind to you. How could you betray him? You swarthy sawed-off incompetent! Come out and fight! We'll see who's the better man!”

Angrily, Song Jiang commanded the guards to open the gate. He directed Lin Chong, Hua Rong, Zhu Tong and Mu Hong to go forth and capture Lu Junyi. Lu restrained his officers from assisting him, and fearlessly charged directly at all four. They battled for more than twenty rounds. Then the four turned their mounts and withdrew towards the city. Lu waved his lance and swept forward with a large contingent in pursuit. Lin Chong and Hua Rong took a stand at the drawbridge over the moat. Then, feigning defeat, they retreated into Bazhou, still battling. The large Song army massed outside set up a mighty cheer.

Inside the city, Song Jiang and his forces immediately turned on the Tartars and joined in the assault. The slaughter was widespread. Many surrendered. Dingan the Royal Brother-in-Law stared, open-mouthed. He was utterly helpless. Together with his ministers, he was caught and bound.

Song Jiang led in the troops which were still outside the city and had a reunion with his chieftains in the prefectural government center. He sent for Dingan the Royal Brother-in-Law and Ministers Ouyang, Jinfu and Yeqing, invited them to be seated, and received them courteously.

“You Liaos didn't understand,” he said. “You figured us all wrong. My band of gallants were never bandits racketing around in the wooded hills. Every one is a star spirit. They wouldn't betray their emperor. All we wanted was

to capture Bazhou, and we took this opportunity to do so. Now that we have succeeded, you, Royal Brother-in-Law, may return to your native land. Have no fear. We have no intention of killing you. Those under you may also go back, with their families. Bazhou now belongs to our empire. Don't contend for it again. Our soldiers will be everywhere. We won't permit any interference."

Song Jiang directed all Tartar officials in the city to leave, and return with Dingan to Youzhou. He also posted proclamations reassuring the local populace, and instructed Lu Junyi to go back with half the troops and hold Qizhou. He himself remained in control of Bazhou with the other half. He sent a messenger with the news to Commissioner Zhao. Overjoyed, Zhao relayed the information in a report to the emperor.

Dingan and his three ministers, plus many officials, travelled to the Tartar capital in Yanjing. They told the king of Song Jiang's false surrender. "And as a result, the barbarians have conquered Bazhou!"

The monarch was furious. He cursed Minister Ouyang. "It's all because of your slavish intrigues, shifting everything around! You've lost us the vital city of Bazhou! How are we going to hold Yanjing!" He shouted an order: "Take him out and execute him!"

Wuyan the commander-in-chief came forward. "Don't worry, Your Majesty. There's no need for our country's king to exert himself over that rogue Song Jiang. We have a plan. Forgive Minister Ouyang. If Song Jiang finds out you had him killed, he'll laugh at us."

The monarch pardoned Ouyang, then questioned Wuyan. How could he defeat the barbarians and recapture the cities?

"I shall go with twenty-eight star-blest generals and eleven Heaven-guided officers and deploy in battle formation. We'll flatten those barbarians in a single action!"

Before the words were out of Wuyan's mouth, Commanding General Ho stepped forward and added his guarantee. "Rest assured, Your Majesty. It seems to me the old saying is correct: You don't kill a chicken with an ox-

slaughtering knife. Why use our regular army for a thing like this? I have a little plan that will send all the barbarians to a graveless death!”

“We shall be delighted to hear it, my dear Minister,” said the king, very pleased.

Opening his mouth and wagging his tongue, Ho detailed his shrewd plan. And as a result, Lu Junyi was lured to a place where the horses had no fodder and the soldiers no grain. The entire Song army almost perished, a band of heroes nearly came to an end.

What was the plan General Ho expounded before the Tartar king? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 86
Song Jiang Battles on Lone Deer Mountain
Lu the Magnate Is Trapped in Stony Valley

Ho Zhongbao, the commanding general, ranked second after Wuyan, the commander-in-chief of the Great Liao armed forces. Very tall, powerfully built, a shrewd strategist, he wielded a three-pointed two-edged sword. He was responsible for the defense of Youzhou Prefecture, and was in charge of every branch of military service.

“We have a place in Youzhou called Stony Valley,” he told the king. “Hemmed in on all sides by high mountains, a single road goes in and ends there. I intend to use a dozen or so cavalrymen to lure the barbarians into that valley and then surround it with troops. The enemy won't be able to go forward, and won't be able to retreat. We'll starve them to death.”

“How will you get them to come?” asked Wuyan.

“They've taken three of our big prefectures, and are feeling very proud of themselves,” said Ho. “They're sure to want Youzhou, next. If I dispatch troops to provoke them, they'll certainly give chase. We'll lead them into the valley, and they'll be stuck!”

“Your plan is incomplete. Once you get them there, you must send a large force in to slaughter them. Now let's see how you go about it.”

General Ho took his leave of the king, donned his armor, buckled on his sword and mounted his horse. He returned to Youzhou at the head of a column of infantry. There he mobilized his soldiers and divided them into three units. One was to defend Youzhou, the other two were ordered to attack Bazhou and Qizhou. These were placed under the commands of Ho Chai and Ho Yun, respectively, younger brothers of the commanding general. They were not to win. In fact they were to pretend defeat and draw the Song army across the line into Youzhou, where the next move of the plan would go into effect.

Meanwhile, in Bazhou, Song Jiang received the report: “The Liaos are assaulting Qizhou. We're in danger of losing it. We hope you'll send relief forces at once.”

“Since they're attacking, we've no reason to be resting,” said Song Jiang. “We'll use this opportunity to conquer Youzhou.”

Leaving behind a small unit to defend the city, he and the rest of the army broke camp and headed for Qizhou. There, they would join forces with Lu Junyi the Magnate's contingent, and set a date for their offensive.

The Tartars under Ho Chai continued their advance on Bazhou. They ran into Song Jiang's troops after they had left the city and were halfway to Qizhou. They clashed only two or three times, and Ho Chai led his soldiers away in a retreat. But Song Jiang did not pursue. He was informed that Ho Yun had assailed Qizhou, and had also withdrawn when Huyan Zhuo came out to give battle.

Song Jiang conferred in his tent with Lu Junyi on how to take Youzhou. Wu Yong and Zhu Wu had some words of caution.

“The enemy wouldn't have split their soldier into two columns if they weren't trying to lure us in. We mustn't fall for their tricks.”

“You're wrong,” Lu protested. “We've beaten them time after time. Why should they want to pull us towards them? If we don't conquer Youzhou now, when we can, it may not be so easy later. Move immediately, I say. What are we wailing for!”

Song Jiang agreed. “The rogues are exhausted. What kind of plan could they have? This is our chance.”

He ignored Wu Yong and Zhu Wu's advice and marched on Youzhou, dividing his forces into three columns, large and small. Soon, the advance unit sent back word: “Liao soldiers ahead, blocking the road.” He rode forward to look.

He saw coming around the side of the mountain a swarm of black flags. Song Jiang ordered his advance unit to spread out. The Tartar army rolled towards them, covering the earth. Bearing their embroidered black flags, they separated into four columns and deployed in front of the mountain slope. As Song Jiang, Lu and the chieftains watched, from the hundreds of thousands of Tartars massed like black clouds, a high general emerged. Holding athwart his three-pointed, two-edged sword, he halted his steed at the opposite end of the field of combat. On his banner were inscribed the legend: *Vice Commander-in-Chief of the Great Liao Army Ho Zhongbao.*

“He must be an excellent warrior,” said Song Jiang. “Who dares to vie against him?”

Before the words were out of his mount, Guan Sheng the Big Halberd, waving his crescent-shaped blade, galloped forward on his roan pinto. No talk was exchanged between the two. They met in instant battle.

Truly, they were two dragons contending for a treasure, a pair of tigers fighting over prey. To and fro they twisted like the turning body of a phoenix, up and down they flailed like the beating wings of a fabulous *luan.* Sword clanged against sword, flashing yards of icy fire. Steed pounded against steed, shaking half the sky with their murderous power.

More than thirty rounds the warriors battled. But Commanding General Ho, instead of intensifying his efforts, turned and rode towards his own lines.

Guan Sheng galloped in pursuit. Ho led his troops back around the mountain. Song Jiang and his army chased them for forty or fifty *li.*

Suddenly, on all sides war drums began to thunder. Song Jiang hastily shouted for his army to withdraw. But a contingent of Tartars, pouring down the slope on the left, blocked his retreat. As he agitatedly divided his forces to meet the threat, another Tartar contingent charged from the right. Ahead, General Ho wheeled his soldiers around to attack from the front. Song Jiang's men were completely enclosed in a giant pincers. The Tartars had cut the Song dynasty army in two.

The rear half, fighting hard under Lu Junyi, could no longer see the forward elements. They desperately sought an opening through which to pull back. Another Liao unit assailed them from the side. The Tartar soldiers, yelling savagely, were now attacking all around, tightly hemming them in. Lu sent his chieftains in charges to left and right, front and rear, urgently trying to break through. They fought with magnificent valor.

Dark clouds suddenly massed, blotting out the sky and turning day into night. The men lost all sense of direction. Lu was panic-stricken. Leading his-troops, he struggled to smash free. The Tartars, hearing ahead the tinkling of bridle bells, galloped to meet the foe.

Lu and his men reached a gap in the mountains. He could hear the voices of the Tartars and the neighing of their horses inside the gap, and he urged his army forward. A wild gale arose, whipping up sand and gravel, blinding both sides. Lu battled in this maelstrom until nearly midnight. Only then did the wind fade and the clouds part, revealing a sky full of stars.

The Song soldiers took their bearings. All around were high trackless mountains and steep pathless cliffs. Only twelve chieftains and five thousand troops could be accounted for. Hemmed in by cliffs all around, they sought in vain for a way out.

“The men are weary after fighting all day,” Lu thought. “We'll rest here tonight and continue searching tomorrow.”

When the dark clouds gathered and the wind blew, Song Jiang's forces were also blinded by sand and gravel and unable to see one another. Gongsun Sheng, on horseback, recognized it at once as a magic spell. He waved his precious sword and muttered an incantation, then shouted: “Speed!” He pointed with his precious sword, and the clouds dispersed and the gale subsided. The Liao army pulled back without giving battle, and the broad evil miasma gradually vanished.

Having broken clear of the encirclement, Song Jiang and his troops withdrew to a high mountain. There they linked up with more of their forces and placed their grain carts in a wide circle to form a rough stockade. A count of the chieftains revealed that thirteen of them, including Lu Junyi the Magnate, were missing, as well as five thousand troops.

At daybreak, Song Jiang sent Huyan Zhuo, Lin Chong, Qin Ming and Guan Sheng with soldiers to look for them. But after searching all day, they could find no trace. He then took out the Three Heavenly Books of the Mystic Maid of Ninth Heaven and lit incense and cast divining sticks. “The general omen isn't bad,” he said, “but they seem to have fallen into an evil area and can't get free.”

Worried, he sent Xie Zhen and Xie Bao, disguised as hunters, to scour the mountains. He also ordered Shi Qian, Shi Yong, Duan Jingzhu and Cao Zheng to travel around and see if they could pick up any news. The Xie brothers, wearing tiger skin robes and carrying steel fork-spears, pushed deep into the mountains. By dusk they saw no sign of human habitation, only an endless jumble of heights. They crossed another few mountains. By then it was night. In the misty moonlight, they saw a pin-point of lamplight on a far slope.

“Someone must live there,” they thought. “We'll go and ask for something to eat.”

They strode swiftly in the direction of the lamplight. After walking a *li* or more, they reached their destination. Beside a grove was a dilapidated shack of two or three rooms. They could see the lamp burning through a crack in the wall. Pushing open the door, they found an old woman of about sixty. They set down their fork-spears and bowed in greeting.

“I thought it was my sons coming home,” said the woman. “I never expected guests. No need for courtesy. Where are you from, hunters? What brings you here?”

“We're from a family of hunters in Shandong,” said Xie Zhen, “but we came to these parts to do bit of trading. Who knew we'd run into armies fighting and killing all over the place? We lost our capital and haven't been able to earn a living. So we've been hunting in these mountains for a little wild game to feed ourselves with. But we don't know the paths and we've lost our way. Could you put us up for the night, old mama?”

“Nobody can carry his home with him, as the old saying goes. My two boys are also hunters. I'm expecting them back today. Just sit yourselves down and I'll make you some supper.”

The Xie brothers thanked her. “We're grateful to you, old mama.”

She went inside, and they sat down outside the front door. Before long, two men appeared, carrying a roebuck. “Ma, where are you?” they called.

The woman came out and said: “So you're back, boys. Put that deer down and meet our guests.”

Xie Zhen and Xie Bao hastily bowed. The other two returned the courtesy and asked: “Where are you from, sirs? What brings you here?” The Xies repeated what they had told the mother.

“We live here,” said the young men. “We're called Liu the Second and Liu the Third. Our father was Liu the First, but unfortunately he died. Only our mother is left. Our family has been hunting for a living for twenty or thirty years. The paths here are tricky. We don't know them all ourselves. You say you're from Shandong? Why come here to seek a living? Don't try to fool us. You're not really hunters, are you?”

“Since it's come to this, there's no use pretending,” said the Xies. “We'll tell you brothers the truth.” Falling on their knees, they explained. “We are indeed hunters from Shandong. We're brothers named Xie Zhen and Xie Bao. But for a long time we've been following our brother Song Jiang in

Liangshan Marsh. Recently, we were amnestied, and we've come with him to smash the Tartars of Great Liao. The other day General Ho scattered one of our units in a big battle, and we don't know what's become of them. We two have been sent out to inquire."

The Liu brothers laughed. "So you both are bold gallants. Rise, please. We'll show you the way. Rest a while. We'll cook you a haunch of venison and warm some local wine. You're our guests."

The meat was soon cooked and the Lius served the Xie brothers. Over the wine they said: "We've long heard how Song Jiang of Liangshan Marsh acts on Heaven's behalf and never harms good people. His fame has spread all the way to the kingdom of Liao."

"Our brother takes loyalty and righteousness as his main guide. He's vowed never to trouble honest folk. He kills only corrupt officials, and uses his strength to aid the weak."

"That's what we heard. So it's really true!"

All four were very pleased. They formed a deep mutual affection.

"That missing contingent of ours," said the Xie brothers. "It has more than a dozen chieftains and four or five thousand men. We can't imagine what's become of them. They must be trapped somewhere."

"You're not familiar with our terrain. This section is under the rule of Youzhou Prefecture. We have a place called Stony Valley. A dead-end road runs into it, and there are steep cliffs on both sides. If that entry is blocked, whoever has gone in can't come out. That's where your unit must be. No other place is broad enough to hold so many troops. Where Vanguard General Song Jiang is camped is called Lone Deer Mountain. Before it is a broad plain where you can fight freely, and from the summit you can see foes approaching from any direction.

"If you want to rescue your unit, you have to crack open Stony Valley at all costs. The enemy must have a large force bottling up the entry. That section is full of cypress trees, and the two tallest ones, looking like big umbrellas,

mark the entrance to the valley. You can see them from a long way off. Rut be careful. Commanding General Ho can work magic spells. General Song Jiang must cope with them."

The Xie brothers thanked the Liu's and travelled through the night to return to their camp.

"What have you heard?" Song Jiang asked, the moment he saw them.

They told him what the Liu brothers had said. Startled, he summoned Wu Yong to a conference. While they were talking, a junior officer entered.

"Duan Jingzhu and Shi Yong are here with Bai Sheng."

"Bai Sheng was trapped together with General Lu. It's a wonder he was able to get away," exclaimed Song Jiang. He summoned the three to his tent.

Duan Jingzhu spoke first. "I was scouting with Shi Yong among some high mountains," he said, "when I saw a bundle of felt rolling down from a summit. We watched it roll to the foot of the slope. It looked like a big ball of felt clothing, all tied with cord. We walked over to the edge of the grove, where it stopped, and found Bai Sheng inside."

Bai Sheng explained. "General Lu and twelve of us chieftains were engaged in a fierce battle. Suddenly the sky darkened and the sun lost its lustre. We couldn't tell one direction from another. We heard voices and the neighing of horses. Lu ordered us to charge. Before we knew it we were deep in a cul-de-sac surrounded by high cliffs and no way out, cut off from any grain or fodder. Our whole column is truly in a bad situation. General Lu directed me to roll down the mountain and try to get through to report. Luckily, I ran into Shi Yong and Duan Jingzhu. We hope you'll send reinforcements quickly, brother, and get us out of there. We're sure to die if you don't."

That very night Song Jiang mustered his troops and, with Xie Zhen and Xie Bao leading the way, headed for the two big cypresses, that is, the entrance to Stony Valley. His order was that the infantry and cavalry fight with all their might. Come what may, they had to smash open the valley.

All night they marched, and by daybreak they could see the two big umbrella-like trees in the distance. A troop under the Xie brothers hastened directly towards the entry. Commanding General Ho spread out his soldiers. The two brothers were eager to be the first to give battle, and Song Jiang wanted to launch a general offensive, but Panther Head Lin Chong galloped swiftly to the fore and engaged Ho Chai, After only two rounds, a thrust in the belly from Lin Chong brought him tumbling from his saddle.

Song Jiang's infantry, seeing that the cavalry had drawn first blood, now raced forward. Li Kui the Black Whirlwind, swinging his pair of battle-axes, carved a path through the Liao soldiers. Behind him came Fan Rui the Demon King Who Roils the World, Bao Xu the God of Death, plus Xiang Chong and Li Gun and their ferocious shield fighters, all wielding their weapons with lethal effect.

Black Whirlwind Li Kui made for Ho Yun. He rushed under his mount and broke its leg with one blow of the ax. Animal and rider fell to the ground. Li flew at them with his axes, hacking them both into mincemeat. The Liao soldiers swarmed forward, but they were stopped cold by Fan Rui, Bao Xu and their shield fighters.

Commanding General Ho had seen his two brothers die. He muttered a magic incantation. A wild gale rose and black clouds covered the mountain-tops, plunging the entire valley into darkness. Song Jiang summoned Gongsun Sheng. The Taoist, seated on his horse, murmured a few words, grasping his precious sword. Then, in a loud voice, he shouted: “Speed!”

Strong winds from all sides blew the clouds away to reveal a brightly shining red sun. In full force, Song Jiang's troops tore into the Liao army. His magic having failed and the enemy attacking with such vigor, General Ho could only wave his sword, clap his horse and gallop from the field. The two armies clashed in savage battle. Finally, the Tartars broke and fled helter-skelter.

The cavalry chased them, while the infantry opened up the entry to the valley. The Tartars had piled it high with big stones, blocking the road. After removing the stones, the foot soldiers pushed in quickly. Lu Junyi, when he saw them, cried out that he was ashamed.

Song Jiang ordered a halt to the pursuit of the Liao troops. “Call everyone back to Lone Deer Mountain,” he said. “Our men and horses need rest.”

Lu wept aloud. “If you hadn't come to my rescue, I surely would have died!”

Song, Lu, Wu Yong and Gongsurt rode back to camp side by side. There, the men removed their armor and rested. The next day, Wu Yong had a proposal.

“We ought to use this opportunity to take Youzhou. If we can do that, we'll have the Liao kingdom in the palm of our hand.”

Song Jiang directed Lu Junyi and the twelve chieftains and their forces to proceed to Qizhou and rest there temporarily. Leading the other chieftains and troops personally, he left Lone Deer Mountain and set out for Youzhou.

By then Commanding General Ho had retreated into the city, very distressed by the loss of his two brothers. A cavalry scout reported: “Song Jiang's army is advancing for an attack.” Ho grew even more upset.

Tartar soldiers mounted the city walls and looked. From the northeast a contingent bearing red banners, and from the northwest a contingent bearing green banners, were moving rapidly towards Youzhou. General Ho was shocked when the news was transmitted to him. He went up on the walls to see for himself. To his relief, he recognized the banners as Liao standards.

Inscribed with letters of silver, the red banners were those of Taizhen Xuqing, the Royal Son-in-Law, with an army of over five thousand. The green banners, written in gold and decorated with pheasant feathers, belonged to Security General Li. Keeper of the Palace and Vice Minister of Royal Security, Li Ji was a hereditary noble descended from the famous Han Dynasty official LiLing. His headquarters were in Xiongzhou, and he had more than ten thousand troops under his command. It was he who conducted the major raids on the Song borders. When he heard that the king of Liao was losing his cities, he hurried to the rescue.

General Ho sent this message to both columns: “Do not enter the city, but conceal yourselves north of the mountains. When I sally forth against Song Jiang's forces, close in on them from left and right.” He then marched from Youzhou with his army.

As Song Jiang neared the city Wu Yong said: “If they bar the gates and don't come out that means they're not prepared. If they march to meet us that means they've laid an ambush, for sure. In that case, we should divide into three columns, one to continue the advance on the city, the other two to guard against flank attacks by the ambushers.”

Truly, soldiers must meet all assaults, whether by land or water. Song Jiang instructed Guan Sheng, aided by Xuan Tan and Hao Siwen, to lead the left column, and Huyan Zhuo, with the assistance of Shan Tinggui and Wei Dingguo, to lead the right. Each would consist of more than ten thousand men, and would advance slowly along the paths behind the mountains. Song Jiang would command the main force and march directly on Youzhou.

Meanwhile, General Ho moved out with his troops to meet the attackers. The two armies confronted each other, and Lin Chong rode forth and engaged the general. After less than five rounds, Ho turned and rode away. Song Jiang's soldiers pursued. General Ho split his army into two columns. But instead of entering Youzhou, they skirted round it and continued on.

With a cry of “Halt!” Wu Yong ended the chase. Almost before the command had left his lips, Taizhen the Royal Son-in-Law charged down from the left, to be met by Guan Sheng's column. Huyan Zhuo engaged Security General Li's assault from the right. Three battles were raging at once. Corpses covered the plain, and blood flowed in rivers.

It was obvious to General Ho that the Tartars could not win. He wanted to return to Youzhou, but he encountered Hua Rong and Qin Ming, who engaged him in fierce combat. He tried to get to the West Gate, but he was blocked by General Two Spears Dong Ping, and another savage clash ensued. He turned towards the South Gate, but there Zhu Tong compelled him once again to fight a pitched battle. Not daring to continue in his attempts to reach the city, he struck out north along the main road. He was

quite unprepared when Huang Xin the Suppressor of the Three Mountains charged, waving his big sword.

Panic-stricken, Ho became flurried. A blow from Huang struck his horse's head. The general abandoned the animal and ran. Two infantry chieftains, Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu, unexpectedly rushed him from the side and threw him flat on his face. At the same time Song Wan galloped up with levelled lance. Rather than disrupt their fraternal unity in contending to be the general's captor, they killed him on the spot.

The Tartar troops scattered and ran for their lives. The Royal Son-in-Law saw Ho's army banner fall and the soldiers flee. He knew the situation was bad. With his red-bannered column, he skirted round the rear of the mountains and hastily departed. Security General Li, engaged in the frontal battle, guessed that something had gone wrong when he could no longer see the red banners. He led his green bannered soldiers to the rear of the mountains and also withdrew.

All three enemy columns were in full retreat. Song Jiang drove directly on Youzhou. He took it without a struggle. Once inside the city, he billeted his troops and issued proclamations reassuring the local populace. He then dispatched an urgent message to Tanzhou, reporting the victory to Commissioner Zhao and requesting him to send troops to hold Qizhou. The naval chieftains and their craft were to come to Youzhou and await further orders. Lu Junyi the Magnate was to use part of his contingent to defend Bazhou.

Four major cities under Song control—Commissioner Zhao was delighted. He immediately sent a report to the emperor and made the necessary troop deployments to Qizhou and Bazhou. The situation was becoming critical for the Kingdom of Great Liao. Commissioner Zhao instructed the naval chieftains to get ready to sail. The big cities of the north were restored to Song rule—a remarkable feat.

The king of Great Liao in his palace summoned his top officials, civil and military. He conferred with Youxi Bojin the premier, vice-premier Chu Jian, and all the highest generals.

“Song Jiang has invaded our borders and taken four major cities. If he could conquer Youzhou, what's to prevent him from attacking our capital? Yanjing will be hard to defend! Commanding General Ho and his two brothers were all killed and Youzhou has been lost. Our country is beset by troubles. What do you ministers think we ought to do?”

Wuyan, the commander-in-chief, stepped forward. “Have no fears, Your Majesty. Several times I have requested to be sent with troops, but always I was prevented. As a result, the brigands are running amok and causing calamity. I beg a royal decree commissioning me to march with an expeditionary force against the foreign invaders and setting a time limit for their defeat. I shall seize Song Jiang and his chieftains and recapture our fallen cities.”

The king acceded to his request. He issued to Wuyan the pearl-encrusted tiger standard, a gold seal and a royal decree, yellow and white panoplies, and banners of red and black. The monarch's orders were strict.

“Everyone—regardless of noble birth, royal kinship, or military affiliation—shall obey the commands of my beloved minister Wuyan. Muster an army quickly and set forth.”

Wuyan, carrying the royal seal and official tallies, went to the training field, summoned his generals, and ordered them to gather all the Tartar forces and bring them to the capital. His eldest son, Yanshou, approached him in the reviewing pavilion with a suggestion.

“While you're raising this huge army, father, why not let me go first with a number of fierce generals, join forces with Taizhen the Royal Son-in-Law and Security General Li, and attack Youzhou. We'll slaughter eight tenths of the barbarians, and when you come you'll mop up the rest as easily as catching turtles in a jug! How does that strike you, father?”

“A good idea, my son. Take five thousand cavalry and twenty thousand crack infantry, and go. Since you're joining with the Royal Son-in-Law and the Security General, it should work out well. If you succeed, let me know by urgent dispatch.”

Happily, Yanshou mustered his troops and left for Youzhou.

And because Wuyan's son dared the Song army to combat, the outskirts of Youzhou became the approaches to the Nine Li Mountains, and the banks of the Wanshui River became busy fording points.

Truly, Heaven and Earth tremble when cavalry legions race, demons quake when hordes of infantry charge.

How did Yanshou challenge battle? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 87
Song Jiang Wages a Big Battle at Youzhou
Huyan Zhuo Forcibly Captures a Tartar General

Yanshou, leading twenty thousand men, after joining forces with Taizhen the Royal Son-in-Law and Security General Li, had thirty-five thousand soldiers under his command. He made sure their arms and equipment were all in order, and then set forth. A scout soon reported this to Song Jiang in Youzhou. Song conferred with Wu Yong, his military advisor.

“We've defeated the Liao forces several times in a row. They must be sending their crack troops and best generals against us. What should our tactics be?”

“Station our army outside the city and wait. Challenge them when they arrive. If we show them up as incompetent, they'll of course withdraw.”

“Clever and clear, Military Advisor.” Song Jiang ordered his contingents to leave the city.

Ten *li* from Youzhou is a flat plain called Fangshan. It is fringed by mountains and streams. Here, the army deployed into a Nine-Unit Octagon battle position.

Before long, the Tartars came into sight, in three columns. The one under young commander Yanshou, Wuyan's son, carried black banners. The Royal

Son-in-Law's column bore red banners. Green were the banners of the Security General's column. All three spread out in battle positions when they saw Song Jiang's army.

Yanshou had learned military tactics under his father's personal tutelage. His knowledge was profound, his skill tricky. He viewed Song Jiang's battle formation, then directed his red and green banner contingents to deploy to left and right and build fortifications. He himself mounted a “sky ladder” amid his central column and observed Song Jiang's position. He came down with a superior smile on his face.

“Why are you smiling, General?” his lieutenants asked.

“That Nine-Unit Octagon of Song Jiang—who doesn't know that! It can't fool anybody. I'll just give him a scare.”

He ordered three flourishes on the decorated battle drums, and had a command platform erected. Mounting the platform, with two flags he signalled deployment instructions to his left and right columns. Then he came down, got on his horse, directed his top officers to spread out the army, and rode to the front to confront Song Jiang.

He shouted: “You Nine-Unit Octagon can't deceive anyone! Do you recognize my formation?”

So the Tartar commander wanted to vie in deployment positions, did he? Song Jiang directed that “sky ladders” be erected, and he, Wu Yong and Zhu Wu climbed up to have a look at the Liao contingents. The three columns were linked, with left and right near enough to provide mutual support.

Zhu Wu recognized it immediately. “That's called the Great Monad and Three Powers—Heaven, Earth and Man,” he told Song Jiang.

Leaving the other two on the command platform, Song Jiang came down and rode to the front. He pointed with his whip at Yanshou.

“You've set out a Great Monad and Three Powers position,” he called. “There's nothing special about that.”

“So you recognize it,” said the young Tartar. “Watch us change, and see if you still know it.” He turned and rode back to his command platform, mounted it and signalled a change with his flags.

Wu Yong and Zhu Wu, from their platform, saw that the foe had assumed a Four Elephants formation. They sent word to Song Jiang. Meanwhile, Yanshou had again emerged and sat his steed, weapon athwart.

“Do you recognize our position?” he demanded.

“You've converted into a Four Elephants formation.”

The young Tartar shook his head in surprise and laughed coldly. Again he climbed his platform and signalled with his flags, while Wu Yong and Zhu Wu watched from their own platform. “That's the Revolving Octagon,” said Zhu Wu. Again he notified Song Jiang.

Once more the young Tartar appeared at the front. “Can you recognize that?”

Song Jiang laughed. “It's only the Revolving Octagon! Nothing unusual!”

Thoughtfully, Yanshou said to himself: “I learned these deployments from teachers in secret, yet he identified them all. He must have some talented people on his staff.”

Again he returned to his central column, got down from his horse, climbed the platform, and signalled with his flags. His army broke into eight eights, or sixty-four units, with no opening on any side. Zhu Wu, on the “sky ladder,” recognized it.

“That's the Eight-Sector Diagram of Zhuge Liang,” he told Wu Yong. “Head and tail are both concealed. No one knows where they are.” They dispatched a man to request Song Jiang to come up and see for himself!

“Don't underestimate that Liao general,” they advised him when he had joined them on the platform. “Those four are all traditional battle positions. They've been passed down without change. The first was the Great Monad and Three Powers. From that came the Four Elephants, which then produced the Revolving Octagon, which converted to the Eight-Sector Diagram. An incomparable progression, a matchless deployment!”

Song Jiang came down from the platform, mounted, and rode to the front. The Tartar general stabbed his halberd into the ground and reined in.

“Can you recognize our position?” he shouted.

“You are only a young commander with narrow vision, like a frog at the bottom of a well! All you know is these few deployments. Moves like your Eight-Sector Diagram, with its concealed head, couldn't deceive even a child of the Song empire!”

“Since you know all of my battle positions, why not lay out a marvellous one of your own? See if you can fool me!”

“I only know the Nine-Unit Octagon. It may not be very profound, but dare you attack?”

The young Tartar laughed. “A small operation, nothing to it! Don't pull anything sneaky. Just watch us knock you over!”

He ordered the Royal Son-in-Law and the Security General to be ready with a thousand men each. “After I drive into their position,” he told them, “you reinforce me.” His battle drums began to pound.

Song Jiang also ordered three flourishes on his battle drums, and directed that the gate of pennants be opened and the young general be allowed to enter.

Yanshou assembled a task force of around twenty junior officers and a thousand armored cavalrymen. He calculated on his fingers that this was a “fire” day, and therefore decided not to attack from due south. He led his contingent around to the left to a point southwest of his objective, unfurled

his white banners, and charged. Only half his unit was able to penetrate the Song lines. A shower of arrows halted the rear half and sent it back to its own position.

The young Tartar drove directly into Song Jiang's central column. Suddenly, a silvery metal barricade seemed to rise all around him. He blanched and thought: “Where did that wall come from?” He ordered his men to push out the way they came in.

But when they turned they saw behind them a misty silvery sea. Everywhere was gurgling water, but no path. Increasingly agitated, Yanshou led his troops due south, but a ball of fire, spewing long rays like sunset beams, rolled before them. Not a single enemy soldier was in sight. The young Tartar dared not advance in that direction.

They swerved to the east, only to be confronted by leafy trees and tangled undergrowth and, at either end, stakes of branches sharpened like deer antlers. They'd never get through there! But when they turned north a black mist covered the sky and somber clouds hid the sun. They couldn't see their hands in front of their faces. It was as dark as the chambers of Hell.

Yanshou was completely stymied. “Song Jiang must be working some magic,” he said to himself. “It's hopeless. All we can do is smash our way out, or die trying!” He gave the command and his men charged, yelling.

“Where do you think you're going, infant general!” boomed the voice of a big commander who suddenly broke through from the side. A rod flew down towards Yanshou's forehead. Sharp-eyed and nimble, he parried the blow with his crescent-bladed halberd. But immediately a pair of rods struck, snapping his weapon in two. Before he could resist, the foe closed in swiftly, locked him effortlessly in ape-like arms and, with a single twist of his wolf-like waist, lifted him from his saddle and captured him.

Blocked, his cavalry troop obeyed when they were shouted at to dismount. They could see nothing in the stygian darkness. They had no choice but to get down from their horses and surrender. The man who had taken Yanshou prisoner was none other than Tiger Chieftain Two Rods Huyan Zhuo. Gongsun Sheng, who had worked the magic, on learning that the young

Tartar general had been caught, put an end to the spell. The sun once more shone on the battlefield from a clear blue sky.

Meanwhile, Taizhen the Royal Son-in-Law and Security General Li, each with a thousand soldiers, waited for news so that they could bring up their reinforcements. But since, to their surprise, they heard nothing, they didn't venture to move. Song Jiang now appeared at the front and called to them.

“Surrender, you two units. What are you waiting for? We've already captured Yanshou.” At his order, his swordsmen pushed the young Tartar general forward.

Security General Li spurred his horse and galloped to rescue Yanshou with levelled lance. Qin Ming the Thunderbolt, brandishing his wolf-toothed cudgel, rode out to meet him. They clashed, weapons flailing, as the two armies set up a mighty yell.

Li lost his nerve, and his hands faltered. One blow from the wolf-toothed cudgel shattered his helmet and his skull together. He fell in a heap to the ground.

The sight was too much for the Royal Son-in-Law. He retreated rapidly with his unit. Song Jiang ordered his men to pursue. The great Liao forces fled in utter defeat. More than three thousand cavalry mounts were captured that day. Fallen banners and weapons filled the valley. Song Jiang led his troops on to Yanjing, determined to roll up the rest of the foe and win back all imperial territory under Liao domination.

Remnants of the defeated Tartar contingent reached Commander-in-Chief Wuyan and told him that his son Yanshou had been captured in battle and all his officers had surrendered. Security General Li had been killed by a blow of Qin Ming's club and his troops had fled, no one knew where. Taizhen the Royal Son-in-Law had also run for his life. There was no news of him, either.

Wuyan was shocked. “My son studied military art since childhood. He was very adept,” he said. “How could that rogue Song Jiang have captured him?”

“And all he had was a Nine-Unit Octagon defense. Nothing remarkable,” Wuyan's lieutenants added. “Yet when our young general formed four different deployments, that barbarian knew every one of them. He said to him: 'You recognized my Nine-Unit Octagon, but dare you attack?' And when we charged from the west with over a thousand cavalry, he deluged us with arrows so that only half our men got through, and somehow he captured our young general.”

“That Nine-Unit Octagon is easy enough to hit,” mused Wuyan. “He probably converted it into something else.”

“We could see from our command platform—he didn't move his troops and his flags didn't change,” the commanders assured him. “But a black cloud covered the battlefield.”

“He must have used magic. If we don't muster our army, the scoundrel is sure to come here. I'll win victory or kill myself! Who dares to lead soldiers as my vanguard general?”

Two high-ranking officers promptly stepped forward and volunteered. One was Qiong Yaonayan, a national army general. The other was Kou Zhenyuan, a general of the Yanjing city contingent.

Wuyan was pleased. He said: “Proceed cautiously. Take a vanguard of ten thousand and open a road through the mountains. Where necessary, build bridges. Our main force will follow.”

The two departed. Wuyan then appointed eleven senior generals and twenty-eight lieutenant-generals as commanders of the expeditionary force. It would consist of over two hundred thousand crack troops— all the country's available soldiers. He would petition the king himself to lead it.

Meanwhile, Qiong and Kou advanced through the mountains with their ten thousand men. A scout reported to Song Jiang in Youzhou the approach of this formidable foe. Startled, Song Jiang notified Lu the Magnate to bring as many men as possible. He also ordered the transfer of troops from Tanzhou and Qizhou, and invited Commissioner Zhao to come and observe

the operations. He directed his naval chieftains to call their sailors ashore, and assemble in Bazhou before continuing their march.

Commissioner Zhao, under the protection of the naval chieftains, arrived last. All required forces were now congregated in Youzhou. After greetings had been exchanged, Commissioner Zhao complimented Song Jiang.

“You're so tireless, General, a pillar of our country! Your fame, your irradicable virtue, shall be known for countless generations. When I return to the capital, I shall recommend you highly to the emperor.”

“A useless small official like me is not worth mentioning. Basking in the reflected glory of our great emperor and benefiting from Your Excellency's splendid prestige, I have made some small accomplishments. Anyone could have done the same. I have recently been informed that Tartar Commander-in-Chief Wuyan, by draining his nation's military manpower, has raised an army of over two hundred thousand, and is heading this way. Victory or defeat depends on the coming battle. I propose that you build a fort fifteen *li* from here, Commissioner, and observe how my brothers and I exercise our utmost fidelity and strength in this decisive engagement! Sustained by the emperor's overflowing virtue, we sure shall win victory to show our gratitude for His Majesty's benevolence!”

“Use your opportunities well, General. Sun Zi said: 'More calculation or less calculation determines victory or defeat.' Plan your strategy carefully. Consider every detail.”

Song Jiang bid farewell to the commissioner and set off with Lu the Magnate at the head of a large army. They skirted Yongqing County, which is part of Youzhou Prefecture, set up camp and built fortifications. All the chieftains assembled in the headquarters tent for a conference.

“Wuyan is leading the entire Liao army against us,” said Song Jiang. “This is no small matter. The battle will decide our life or death. You brothers must push forward and never retreat. The smallest merit will be reported to the court, and the emperor's rewards will be mutually shared. No one person will reap the benefits.”

The chieftains rose and said: “We would never dare disobey your orders. We shall do our best in gratitude for your great kindness.”

A junior officer entered. “A Liao emissary is here with a battle challenge.”

Song Jiang directed that he be brought to the tent to present the document. Opening it, Song Jiang read that Generals Qiong and Kou, who were under Commander-in-Chief Wuyan of the Kingdom of Liao, as leaders of a vanguard force challenged the Song army to a decisive battle on the morrow. Song Jiang noted his acceptance on the bottom of the document. He ordered that the emissary be given food and wine and allowed to return to his own encampment. At daybreak the following day victory or defeat would be determined.

It was late autumn and early winter then. The men wore heavy armor, hide coverings protected the horses. The Song troops finished breakfast before dawn. When the sun topped the horizon, they broke camp and marched. Before they had gone five *li* they saw the Liao army in the distance. Amid the foe's embroidered black flags, two vanguard banners glistened. Battle drums thundered, the gate of pennants opened, and General Qiong rode forth. Lance athwart his prancing horse, he halted at the edge of the field of combat.

Song Jiang, beneath his own gate of pennants, was impressed by Qiong's heroic appearance. “Who will vie with this general?” he asked.

Nine Dragons Shi Jin, sword in hand, galloped forward on bounding steed. The two chargers met and their riders battled, sword against lance in a dazzling pattern of motion. Four arms thrust and flailed, eight hoofs churned the turf. Twenty or thirty rounds the men fought. Shi Jin felt his strength ebbing. He turned his horse and headed back towards his own position, with Qiong in hot pursuit.

Hua Rong, who had been directly behind Song Jiang, notched an arrow to his bowstring and rode to the front. When the Tartar was close enough, Hua Rong let fly. The arrow struck Qiong in the face and knocked him from his saddle. Shi Jin, hearing him fall, wheeled his mount around and raced back.

With one sweep of the sword, he dispatched Qiong Yaonayan. Though an able warrior, the poor Tartar official nevertheless lost his life.

When Kou saw Qiong cut down, fury rose in his heart, rage flooded his gall. With levelled lance he urged his steed to the front.

“What bandit dared kill my brother with a sniper's arrow?” he cried.

Sun Li the Sickly General galloped out to engage Kou. Pounding battle drums shook the heavens, the air rang with ear-splitting yells. Sun Li's lance darted like a thing possessed. Kou was eight-tenths afraid. After only twenty or so rounds, he turned his horse and fled. Rather than disturb his army's front, he circled to the northeast.

Sun Li, eager to distinguish himself, didn't slacken his chase. Kou was well in the lead. The Sickly General set his lance in its socket, took his bow in his left hand, notched an arrow with his right, and drew the bow to its full. Aiming at Kou's back, he let fly.

The Tartar heard the twang and threw himself prone. As the arrow whizzed by, he snatched it. Sun Li silently applauded his foe. Kou laughed scornfully.

“The rogue thinks he's an archer!”

He clamped the arrow between his teeth and set his lance in the saddle rings. Quickly, he grasped a stiff bow in his left hand, fitted the arrow with his right, twisted around in the saddle and shot at Sun Li's chest.

The Sickly General had seen what the Tartar was up to, and had been riding a zig-zag course. He flung himself back as the arrow neared him, and it flew harmlessly past. His steed couldn't be checked. It careened onward at an all-out run.

Kou slung the bow over his shoulder. He looked back and saw Sun Li lying prone on his horse.

“That arrow must have got him,” he thought.

But Sun Li was only pretending. His powerful legs gripped his animal's middle in a tight clasp which prevented him from falling off. Kou slowed his mount and turned to capture his pursuer. When the two horses were only a few meters apart, Sun Li suddenly sat up.

“If I don't take you now,” he yelled, “you'll surely run away!”

Kou was stunned. But he shouted back: “You dodged my arrow, let's see you avoid my lance!”

He thrust at Sun Li with all his force. Sun Li swelled his chest and let the point clang against his armor and slide off to the side, then he moved in swiftly and grappled with his opponent. He raised the steel rod hanging from his wrist and brought it down in a crushing blow which tore away half of Kou's pate. The Tartar commander who for most of his life had been an official in Zhenyuan, died at Sun Li's hand, and his corpse lay at his horse's feet.

With upraised lance, Sun Li returned to the front. Song Jiang and his army charged the foe. Leaderless, the Tartars fled in all directions.

Song Jiang was still pursuing them when he heard ahead a volley of cannon fire. He ordered his naval chieftains to take a contingent and block the water approaches. Just as he was directing Hua Rong, Qin Ming, Lu Fang and Guo Sheng to ride to the top of the mountain and keep watch, he saw the Tartars rumbling towards them in swarms which covered the earth. Song Jiang was terrified. His three souls shook and his seven spirits trembled.

Truly, no matter how clever a man may be, it is difficult to escape danger. Whose was this great army now approaching? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 88
Commander-in-Chief Yan Sets Up a Zodiac Deployment
The Mystic Queen Instructs Song Jiang in a Dream

From a bluff Song Jiang viewed the powerful Liao army, then rode quickly back to his own position. He ordered a withdrawal to a mountain pass in Yongqing County. There, in his tent, he conferred with Lu the Magnate, Wu Yong and Gongsun Sheng.

“Although we defeated them in battle and killed two of their vanguard generals,” he said, “the army I saw from the bluff is huge and strong. They're coming in endless lines. Only a tremendous force can deal with them. But we're comparatively few. What can we do?”

“Skilled generals among the ancients were able to defeat larger foes and do it beautifully,” said Wu Yong. “In the old days, Xie Xuan of the state of Jin, with fifty thousand troops, beat back Fu Jian with twice that number. There have been many such cases. What are you worried about! Order out soldiers to go into battle with pennants tightly ranked, arrows notched to the bows, swords out of their scabbards. Set deer antler stakes in depth, alertly defend our camps. Construct good trenches and fortifications, have our weapons all laid out, our ladders and cannons in working order, and everything in proper readiness. We'll deploy simply in the Nine-Unit Octagon. This will be our defense. Though they come with a million soldiers, they won't dare to attack!”

“Well put, Military Advisor,” said Song Jiang. He transmitted his instructions and directed his chieftains to await his orders.

Breakfast was before dawn the next day, and they broke camp when the sun cleared the horizon. They marched to the border of Changping County, spread out in battle formation, and set up new encampments. Foremost were the cavalry. Then came the infantry under Tiger General Qin Ming, with Huyan Zhuo to the rear, Guan Sheng on the left, Lin Chong on the right. Suo Chao was southeast, Xu Ning northeast, Dong Ping southwest, and Yang Zhi northwest. Song Jiang commanded the central contingent. The other chieftains maintained their original posts. The rear infantry

established another position, under the command of Lu Junyi the Magnate, Sagacious Lu and Wu Song.

Amid their thousands of troops, the chieftains, talented militarists every one, rubbed their hands and prepared for the slaughter. The positions were laid out. They were ready for the Tartars.

Before long, they saw the Liao contingents moving forward in the distance. First came six units, serving both as an opening wedge and a defensive shield, three to the left and three to the right, five hundred men in each, the relative positions of the units shifting constantly.

Behind these the main force followed, their numbers covering the earth. The lead contingent was a sea of black flags and it stretched out in a row of seven cavalry troops, with a thousand riders in each, and each led by a senior commander. How were the commanders attired? Black helmets, armor and robes, astride ebony steeds and bearing ordinary arms. Each troop was designated by one of the Seven Northern Constellations.

The commanding general of all seven had on his standard the Mystic Militant Water Planet of the North. How was he dressed? A brown bandanna which covered his forehead bound his long silky black hair. Over a sleeveless black robe was silver armor chilling to behold. A lion's head belt clasped the darkly gleaming metal. He sat his spirited stallion firmly in a saddle of tooled leather. Hanging from his shoulder, the quiver bearing his arrows and hard bow of scoured poplar was decorated with animals rampant and flying fish. He held a three-pointed, two-edged, four-sided, eight-ringed sword. His name was Quli Chuqing and his personal troop consisted of three thousand horsemen with black shoulder-length hair, and their standard was the Five Vapors Constellation of the North. Supporting the black bannered contingent were infantry without number.

Green dragons writhed on the banners of the left contingent, which advanced in a row of seven cavalry troops, with a thousand riders in each, and each led by a senior commander. How were these commanders dressed? In four-seamed helmets, scaled armor in the shape of poplar leaves covering robes of kingfisher green. They rode horses with manes dyed green, and carried regular weapons. The Seven Eastern Constellations were

the standards for the seven troops, and over them all was a commanding general whose standard was the Green Dragon Wood Planet of the East.

How was he attired? A lion's head helmet, armor from the hide of a fleet horse over a fine green robe, bound by a girdle of gold and green jade. He sat a saddle of tooled leather, a quiver of bow and arrows hung from his waist, and his hawk's beak boots were planted in stirrups of precious metal. In his hand was a crescent-bladed battle-ax with a filigreed gold handle, and his dragon horse was of the Clear Jade breed. His name was Zhi'er Folang and his personal troop contained three thousand cavalrymen bearing green banners. Their standard was the Nine Vapors Constellation of the East. Supporting the green bannered contingent were countless foot soldiers.

The right contingent, bearing white tiger banners, contained seven cavalry troops in a row, with a thousand riders in each, and each led by a senior commander. How were these commanders attired? In water-burnished helmets, and shining silver armor over plain silk robes. They rode snowy white horses and carried hand-gripped weapons, and their seven troops were designated by the Seven Western Constellations.

Over all seven was a commanding general whose standard was the Gold Planet of the Deep Pool of the West. How was he dressed? In a conical helmet with phoenix feathers, and double hooked armor of patterned silver plus a coldly gleaming jade belt over a fitted plain silk robe of flying snowflakes design. He rode a fleet steed of the Jade That Shines in the Night breed, and wielded a silver halberd of pure steel. His name was Wuli Kean, and his personal troop contained three thousand horsemen bearing white-tasseled silk pennants. Their standard was the Seven Vapors Constellation of the West. Before and behind the white bannered contingent were supporting infantry without number.

Pink banners marked the rear contingent—seven cavalry troops in a row, each with a thousand horsemen, each led by a senior commander. How were these commanders attired? In conical hats of ochre red and robes dyed the color of orangoutan blood, over which was chain and fish-scale armor of peach pink. They rode roan chargers called Red Rabbits and carried grip-handled weapons. The troops were named after the Seven Southern

Constellations. Over all was a commanding general whose standard was the Ochre Peacock Fire Planet.

How was he dressed? In a stitched cap with shiny red tassels, and a purple-sheened pink robe covered by armor with a sunset design, and boots basted with red thread. A red leather belt encrusted with precious stones bound his waist, a quiver containing a hard bow and arrows hung from his shoulder. He carried an eight-foot-long dragon sword in his hand and rode a rough-red steed. He was General Dongxian Wenrong, and he led a personal troop of three thousand horsemen bearing red silk pennants. Their standard was the Three Vapors Constellation of the South. Supporting the pink-bannered contingent were foot soldiers without number in red-tasseled, red-stitched clothes.

In front of the Liao fixed position to the left were five thousand fierce horsemen, wearing caps stitched with gold thread and gold-plated armor over pink robes with crimson tassels. They bore fiery-red banners and rode roan steeds. The commander wore a stitched gold cap of hibiscus and sceptre pattern, and golden chain mail of linked animal faces over a fiery red embroidered robe, bound by a girdle encrusted with gold and precious stones. He carried a matched set of Sun and Moon swords and rode a Five Luminances red horse. He was Prince Yelu Dezhong, Royal Brother of the King of Liao. His standard was the Sun.

To the right in front of the Liao fixed position were five thousand women cavalry. They were dressed in patterned silver caps, silver hooked armor over plain robes of tasseled silk, and bore white pennants, rode white horses, and wielded silver-handled blade-lances. Their commander had in her hair, on opposite sides of her head, two pins of phoenix design trailing green silk. Around her forehead was a red silk band with precious stone sequins. The cloud pattern on her shoulders was tastefully set off by the brocade of her skirt. Over her silver armor she wore a tunic embroidered with dragons. Her small flowered boots rested firmly in her stirrups. In her diaphanous sleeve she carried a light jade-handled whip. She bore a Seven Star precious sword and rode a spirited silver-white horse. She was Dalibo, Royal Princess of the Kingdom of Liao. Her standard was the Moon.

Between the left and right cavalry units, amid a mass of yellow banners, were generals in golden armor, riding gold-hued horses. Their robes and armor formed a swath of yellow clouds, their embroidered yellow turbans were a mist covering half the sky. Four of these generals held the highest rank. Each commanded three thousand soldiers, and each defended one of the four corners of a square.

In the southeast corner was Royal Nephew Yelu Derong. He wore golden armor and an animal-face belt over a robe of black. Three pins held his golden cap in place. He carried a bow and arrows and a black-tasseled lance, and rode a pale dark steed. His standard was the Mouth of the Net Constellation.

Royal Nephew Yelu Dehua was in the southwest corner. He wore silver armor and a simple belt over a purple robe, and precious ornaments decorated his cap. He carried a stiff bow and arrows, wielded a precious sword and rode a black-maned, black-tailed roan. His standard was the Commemorative Constellation.

In the northeast corner was Royal Nephew Yelu Dechong. He was dressed in a green robe, silver armor, and wore a purple cap and precious belt. Hanging from his waist were a dragon bow and phoenix arrows. He grasped a crescent-bladed halberd and rode a Five Luminances yellow steed. His standard was the Purple Vapor Constellation.

The northwest corner was defended by Royal Nephew Yelu Dexin. He wore bronze armor over a white robe. A red band shot with black thread bound his forehead, and he was adorned with a gold-inlaid, gem-encrusted belt. A carved bow and arrows hung from his waist. In his hand he held a Seven Star precious sword, and he rode a jet-black steed with snowy white fetlocks. His standard was the Lunar Comet.

From among the yellow banners a general emerged whose standard was the Central Control Star. To his left were green flags, to his right were white banners. Before him were red panoplies, behind were black umbrellas. Encircling him were flags representing the twenty-four solar terms, and the sixty-four sections of the Octagon, plus the Southern Aurora, the Northern Dipper, the Flying Dragon, the Flying Tiger, the Flying Bear, and the Flying

Panther—all blending in a confusing array which obscured the Jade Firmament.

How was this general attired? In a purple and gold cap encrusted with precious gems, in tortoise-back armor of gleaming gold over an embroidered silk gown from Sichuan, in a girdle of charming jade from Lantian. His bow, hanging on his left side, had a steel center and was etched in gold. His arrows, in a quiver on his left, had phoenix feathers and barbed heads. He was shod in hawk-beak-patterned, cloud-soled boots, and he rode an iron-backed, silver-footed horse. He sat a decorated saddle, the purple silk reins wrapped around the pommel, his feet firmly in the stirrups. At his waist hung his sword of command, in his hand he held his general's baton.

As he rode to the fore, he grasped the ochre-decorated shaft of his crescent-bladed halberd. Amid that gold and glittering array he was clearly the leader, for he was Wuyan, Commander-in-Chief of the Combined Forces of the Kingdom of Great Liao.

Behind the yellow banners was a royal phoenix and dragon carriage, surrounded by seven concentric rings of fully armed soldiers. In the center were thirty-six pairs of yellow-turbaned warriors who pushed the carriage. Preceding it, on the trace horses, were nine postillion riders in saddles of gold. Eight pairs of warriors in embroidered garments brought up the rear.

Seated on a throne in the middle of the carriage was the King of Great Liao, on his head a tall conical turban, his body encased in a nine-dragon robe of royal yellow, a Lantian jade girdle around his waist, red court boots upon his feet. Flanking him were his ministers. Youxi Bojin, the premier was on his left. Marshal Chu Jian, the vice-premier was on his right. Both wore ornate caps, fiery-skirted ochre gowns with purple fringes and gold slabs, and girdles of ivory and jade. On either side of the throne stood richly dressed boys and girls, holding jade and ivory implements. Royal Guards closely surrounded the carriage. For his standard the king had personally selected the North Star Which Reigns Imperially over All. The ministers to his left and right flew banners showing accompanying constellations.

The Liao army was now in position, spread out in an egg-shaped celestial deployment, anchored firmly like an overturned basin. Flags in four

corners, weapons on eight sides, locked in shifting rings, the Tartars were able to advance or withdraw at will.

Song Jiang first pinned down the enemy's forward pickets with arrows from his archers. Then he and Wu Yong and Zhu Wu climbed a sky-ladder for a look. What he saw astonished him. Wu Yong didn't recognize the Tartar layout, but Zhu Wu said it was a Zodiac Deployment.

“It's called the Great Monad,” he explained.

“How should it be assaulted?” Song Jiang asked.

“It keeps changing all the time. It's very difficult to come to grips with it,” said Zhu Wu. “I don't know how to assault it.”

“If we can't crack it open, how are we going to drive them back?”

“The trouble is we don't really understand their set-up,” said Wu Yong. “How can we attack?”

While they were conferring, Wuyan the Tartar commander-in-chief was issuing his orders. “Today is a 'gold' day,” he said. “We'll therefore have four officers—Gold Dragon Zhang Qi, Gold Ox Xue Xiong, Gold Dog Aliyi and Gold Ram Wang Jing—go with the Great White Gold Star General Wuli Kean and attack Song Jiang.”

At the battle front, Song Jiang and his chieftains observed the seven Tartar troops to the left. Their pennant gates now opened, now closed, while drums thundered. Within their position, they seemed to be moving about a lot. The commander's banner travelled from east to north, to west, to south.

“The Celestial Platter is turning to the left,” said Zhu Wu, “and today is a 'gold' day. That means they're going to attack.”

Before the words were out of his mouth, five cannons boomed in unison, and soldiers surged out of the enemy position. In their center was the Gold Star General and his four satellites. With the force of an avalanche they led five troops in a murderous charge. Nothing could stop them. Taken by

surprise, Song Jiang's forces hastily retreated, while trying to stem the foe's advance. But the Tartars caught them in a pincers, and they suffered heavy losses. They scrambled back to their fortified camp. The Liao army did not pursue.

A check revealed that Kong Liang had received a sword wound, Li Yun had been hit by an arrow, Zhu Fu had been injured by shrapnel, and Shi Yong had been stabbed by a lance. Among the troops there were wounds without number. The casualties were loaded onto carts and sent to a rear camp for medical treatment by Dr. An Daoquan. Song Jiang instructed his forward echelons to lay iron brambles and plant deer antler stakes and defend the camp's approaches.

“We took a beating today,” Song Jiang said to Lu Junyi moodily. “What are we going to do? If we don't go out and challenge them, they're sure to launch an offensive.”

“Use two columns to hit the units defending their flanks, while another two assault the seven troops due north,” Lu proposed. “Then have our infantry pour in through the middle. We'll see what the knaves have got in there.”

“All right.”

The next day, in accordance with Lu's suggestion, they put their fortified camp in order, opened the gates wide, and moved forward with their assault contingent. As they neared the Liao position, the six units in charge of defense spotted them. Song Jiang ordered Guan Sheng to move up from the left, Huyan Zhuo from the right. He himself advanced in a frontal drive. Soon, they were in contact with the foe. Song Jiang then dispatched two more contingents to strike at the black-bannered seven troops in the center from the left and right. Sure enough, they broke them, and inflicted heavy casualties.

The black-bannered troops were in disarray. Song Jiang now ordered the five hundred shield warriors under Li Kui the Black Whirlwind to strike, to be followed by an infantry charge led by Sagacious Lu and Wu Song. It was a chaotic battle. Cannon thundered on all sides. Two columns from east and west, and the king's own yellow-bannered troops directly ahead, smashed

into Song Jiang's forces. The pressure was too great. They turned and fled. The rear guard couldn't hold. It was badly mauled by the time it reached the fortified camp.

A check showed that more than half of Song Jiang's effectives had been destroyed. Du Qian and Song Wan were severely wounded. Li Kui was missing—as he hacked his way into the enemy position Black Whirlwind had been pinned down by hooked poles and captured. The news distressed Song Jiang. He ordered Du Qian and Song Wan to the rear camp for medical treatment. Injured horses were led off to be tended by Huangfu Duan.

“Today we lost both Li Kui and the battle,” Song Jiang said to Wu Yong. “What can we do?”

“We captured Wuyan's son, the young general, a few days ago. We can make an exchange.”

“If we do that now, how will we be able to save other chieftains we may lose in the future?”

“Why worry ahead of time, brother? Let's solve first things first.”

A junior officer entered and announced: “A Liao emissary is here with something to say.”

Song Jiang directed that he be brought in. As soon as he was presented, the emissary delivered his message.

“Our commander-in-chief has ordered me to inform you that today we captured one of your chieftains. Instead of killing him, our commander wined and dined him. He offers to exchange him for his son, the young general. If you are willing, we will return your chieftain.”

“We'll bring the young general to the front tomorrow and make the exchange,” Song Jiang promised.

The Tartar emissary mounted his horse and departed.

“We have no plan for breaking the enemy position,” said Song Jiang. “It would be good if we could use the exchange to get a respite in the hostilities.”

Wu Yong agreed. “Our army needs a rest. If we can work out some new strategy in the meanwhile, we can always hit them later.”

That evening, men were sent to fetch the young general to headquarters, and an emissary was dispatched to Commander-in-Chief Wuyan.

The Tartar general was seated in his tent when a junior officer announced: “A messenger is here from Song Jiang.” Wuyan ordered that he be allowed in. The emissary, on entering, spoke his piece.

“Our Vanguard General Song Jiang conveys his respects to Your Excellency. He is ready to exchange the young general for our chieftain. Since the weather is bitterly cold and the soldiers are weary, to prevent frostbite and suffering he proposes an armistice and a renewal of discussions in the spring. We request the Commander-in-Chief's approval.”

“So you've captured that stupid, worthless son of mine,” Wuyan shouted. “Even if he lives, he'd never have the effrontery to face me! We don't need any exchange. Take him out and kill him for me. If Song Jiang wants an end to hostilities, let him surrender, bound hand and foot, and save you all from death! Otherwise, I'll come with my mighty army and not a single blade of grass will be left standing! Now get out!”

The emissary flew back on his horse to the fortified camp and reported the conversation to Song Jiang.

Alarmed, and afraid that he would lose the chance to rescue Li Kui, Song Jiang left camp with the young Tartar general and hurried to the front.

“You can release our chieftain,” he called. “I'm returning your young general. If you don't want an armistice, that's all right with us. We'll fight it out with you to the death!”

From the Liao position Li Kui was quietly placed on a horse and led to the fore. On this side, the same was done with the young general. Without another word from either adversary, the exchange was made. Li Kui returned to camp. The young general rode away. Neither side took hostile action that day. Song Jiang withdrew to camp with his soldiers and celebrated with Li Kui.

Later, he conferred with his chieftains in his tent. “The Liao force is powerful and we have no plan for cracking it,” he said. “I'm anxious and worried. Each day seems like a year. What shall we do?”

Huyan Zhuo had a proposal. “Divide into ten columns. Leave two to hold our position, and hit them with the other eight, together, in a decisive battle.”

“I rely entirely on your united hearts and strength, brothers,” said Song Jiang. “That is the method we'll employ.”

“We couldn't budge them in the last two engagements,” said Wu Yong. “It would be better to wait till they attack us.”

“That doesn't sound like a good idea to me. As long as the brothers are determined to combine against the foe, there's no reason why we should be defeated.”

Orders were issued the same day. The following morning they broke camp, separated into ten columns, and marched out at a rapid pace. Two columns first established a back-up position. The remaining eight, disdaining any preliminary palaver with the foe, plunged into the Zodiac Deployment, shouting and yelling, banners waving.

At once cannon rumbled, forty-eight pennant gates opened, and Tartar soldiers charged in a wide snaking line. Song Jiang's men were taken by surprise. They retreated in disorder, trailing banners and lances, their trumpets and drums askew. They lost many troops before reaching their fortified camp.

Song Jiang ordered his chieftains to defend the mountain pass with pallisaded fortifications, dig a deep moat around the camp, and plant deer-antler stakes. The gates were to be kept closed. No one was to go out. The army would spend the winter in camp.

In response to repeated petitions to the throne by Commissioner Zhao Anfu, the emperor granted winter clothing to the expeditionary force. These were to be delivered by Wang Wenbin, formerly an arms instructor in the Imperial Guards and now the garrison commandant at Zhengzhou. Wang, an intelligent and courageous man, was highly qualified in both civil and military affairs. He left the capital with over ten thousand armored troops and a convoy of civilian drivers and nearly two hundred carts laden with five hundred thousand items of clothing, heading first for Chen Bridge Station. He was instructed to urge Song Jiang to resume hostilities and push for an early victory; delay would be a punishable offense. A yellow banner at the head of the convoy was emblazoned with the words *Imperial Gift Clothing.* Officials along the route supplied food and fodder.

The journey took many a day. At the Border Hall, Wang met Commissioner Zhao, to whom he handed a document from the Council of Administration. Zhao read it. He was very pleased.

“You've come just at the right time, General! Song Jiang has failed repeatedly in his assaults on the Zodiac Deployment laid out by Wuyan, the Liao commander-in-chief. Many of his chieftains were wounded. They are here right now, being treated by Dr. An. Song Jiang has built a fortified camp in Yongqing County and doesn't dare sally forth. He's very depressed.”

“That's why the emperor has sent me. He wants him to resume the offensive in a combined operation with my men. Although Song Jiang has suffered several defeats, I can't go back to the Council of Military Affairs and simply report this to the emperor. I'm not very clever, but I've read a few books on military lore and know a bit about strategy. I'd like to go to the front and try a few tactics. Perhaps I could take some of the burden off Song Jiang in a decisive battle. Would that meet with Your Excellency's approval?”

Commissioner Zhao was delighted. He gave a feast for the commandant and rewarded the carters. He told Wang to deliver the clothing to the troops, but first dispatched an emissary to inform Song Jiang.

When the man arrived, Song Jiang was brooding in his tent. He was advised that Wang Wenbin, the garrison commandant at Zhengzhou, had arrived from the capital with fifty thousand items of winter clothing, and that Wang was authorized to join in a combined offensive. Song Jiang immediately sent a man to lead Wang to his tent, where he welcomed him with wine. After they had downed several cups, Wang asked what seemed to be the difficulty.

“When I was ordered to this border area by the court, thanks to the emperor's beneficent emanations I conquered four big cities,” said Song Jiang. But then, in Youzhou Prefecture, Wuyan, commander-in-chief of the Great Liao Kingdom, laid out a Zodiac Deployment. Two hundred thousand troops, in neat array, like stars in the sky, with the king himself taking personal command! I've lost several engagements in a row. I can hold defensively, but I've no plan for attack. I dare not move. Fortunately, you've come, General. I hope you will teach me.”

“There's nothing wonderful about that Zodiac Deployment! I have no talent, but I'd like to go to the front with you and take a look at it. Then we can decide.”

Song Jiang gladly agreed. He directed Pei Xuan to turn the clothing over to the chieftains for distribution. When all were warmly dressed, they faced south and gratefully shouted long live the emperor. That day a feast was laid for General Wang and his soldiers were rewarded.

The next morning the reinforced army set out. Wang Wenbin mounted and proceeded to the front in full armor. Tartar soldiers opposite, watching their approach, reported it to headquarters. Trumpets and drams promptly sounded in unison, and loud shouts arose. Six cavalry units moved out from the Liao position. Song Jiang dispatched units which drove them back. Wang climbed the command tower for a look.

“It's just an ordinary deployment,” he said, after coming down the ladder. “I don't see anything startling.”

Actually, he didn't recognize the enemy deployment, and was only putting on a show of knowledge. He directed that the drums of the forward echelon pound out a challenge. The drums and trumpets of the adversaries responded in kind. Song Jiang reined in his steed.

“We don't want dogs and wretches,” he shouted. “Have you got any real men who will fight?”

Even before he had finished speaking, the fourth gate of the black-bannered troop opened and an officer flew out. His hair, which hung loose, was bound at the forehead by a strip of yellow silk. He wore darkly gleaming armor of metal hoops over a sleeveless black robe. On a raven-black horse, a three-pointed sword in hand, he rode briskly to the front. Behind him came innumerable junior officers. At the head of their procession, a black banner bore the inscription in letters of silver: *General Quli Chuqing.*

“What better place than here for me to display my skill,” Wang said to himself. With levelled lance he cantered into the field and, without any preliminaries, charged the Tartar general.

Wang lunged with his weapon, the Tartar parried with his blade. They had contended for about twenty rounds when the Tartar turned and fled. Wang raced after him. The Tartar had not really been vanquished. It was only a trick to lure Wang into pursuit. Brandishing his big sword, the Tartar waited till Wang was close, then turned swiftly and hacked. He cleaved Wang clean through from shoulder to chest, tumbling him dead at his horse's feet.

Hurriedly, Song Jiang called back his troops, while the Liao soldiers advanced. They fought a sharp engagement until the Song forces retreated to their camp in disorder. The death of Wang Wenbin had shocked both officers and men, and they stole glances at one another.

Song Jiang wrote a report to Commissioner Zhao: “Wang Wenbin went voluntarily into combat and was killed. Half the soldiers he brought with him have returned to the capital.” Zhao was depressed by the news, go and

extremely worried. He could only relay the information to the emperor and to the Council of Military Affairs.

Brooding in his camp, Song Jiang wracked his brain for a means to break the Liao army. He ate and slept badly, he was restless and disturbed. It was a bitterly cold winter night, and he sighed as he sat huddled over a single candle. Around the second watch, he wearily stretched out with his clothes on. Outside, the wind howled. The chill ate into his bones. He sat up.

Suddenly, he saw before him a green-clad girl acolyte, her palms pressed together in salutation.

“Where did you come from?” he queried.

“I'm here on orders from our queen. She extends her invitation. Can I trouble you to come a short distance with me, General?”

“Where is your queen?”

“Not far.”

Song Jiang went with the acolyte out of the tent. A glow—an interplay of gold and jade—suffused the upper and lower sky. There was a fragrant breeze and a soft mist. The weather was like spring.

They walked only two or three *li* and Song Jiang saw ahead, in a large grove of pine and cypress and purple osmanthus, a stone-balustraded winding path overhung by lush bamboos and swaying willows. Crossing a stone bridge, they passed through a gate with a cinnabar-red lintel. Inside the courtyard were buildings with beautifully painted walls, decorated rafters and beams, red gold-studded doors, jade-tiled roofs and heavy eaves, curtains like delicate prawn tendrils and tortoise-backed window sills.

The acolyte led Song Jiang east along a corridor to a room on the left. She pushed open the vermilion door and asked him to be seated for a few minutes. On all sides of the room were quiet cloud windows and sunset-hued daises. It was filled with the scent of heavenly flowers and rare incense.

The girl went away, but returned very quickly. “Our queen invites the star lord to join her,” she said.

The seat of Song Jiang's chair was scarcely warm. He rose immediately. Two fairy maids came in, wearing garlands of hibiscus and jade. Their garments were of red silk and gold thread, their faces were like the full moon, their hands like tender bamboo shoots. They glided towards Song Jiang and greeted him. He dared not look at them directly.

“You needn't be so modest, General,” they said. “Our queen is just changing her clothes. She wants to discuss some affairs of state. Please come with us.”

Assenting, Song Jiang followed them.

A bell sounded and chimes rang as a green-clad girl welcomed Song Jiang outside a large hall. The two fairy maids preceded him up the stairs on the east side. They approached a pearl curtain. Song Jiang could hear the tinkling of little jade chimes stirring in the breeze. The green-clad girl invited him in. He knelt before an incense table.

Then he raised his eyes and looked around. Amid fresh clouds and purple mist, directly opposite on a couch carved with nine dragons, there sat the Mystic Queen of Ninth Heaven. On her head was a crown of nine dragons and flying phoenixes. She wore a gossamer blouse of pale brown decorated with precious gems in dragon and phoenix design and a sun and moon skirt. Her feet were shod in pearl-studded cloud pattern slippers. She held a rod of flawless white jade. In attendance were twenty or thirty fairy maids.

“It's been several years since I gave you the Three Heavenly Books,” said the Mystic Queen. “You have kept them well and observed them faithfully. Now the Song emperor has sent you against the Tartars. Are you succeeding?”

Song Jiang prostrated himself before her and replied: “I have respected the Books and kept their secret ever since Your Majesty presented them to me. On orders of the emperor I have been campaigning against the Tartars, but I have failed several times in attacks on the Zodiac Deployment laid out by

Wuyan, the enemy's commander-in-chief. I've no idea how to crack it. We're in a precarious situation."

"Don't you know the magic formula?"

Song Jiang again kowtowed. "I do not. I'm just a crude ignorant fellow. Pray, instruct me, Your Majesty."

"The Zodiac Deployment is arranged like the solar system. Simply bludgeoning will never break it. You have to follow the Laws of Harmony and Antagonism. The black-bannered contingent, for example, centers around the Water Planet, and has the Five Vapors Constellation of the North as its standard. You should select seven of your chieftains and equip them with flags, armor, clothing and steeds the color of yellow earth, and have them drive against the contingent's seven cavalry troops. Then order one of your fiercest generals, also dressed in earth-yellow, to go in and capture the foe's Water Planet General. Don't we say that earth conquers water?

"Send white-robed soldiers under eight chieftains against the green-bannered troops on the left, since metal conquers wood. Send red-robed soldiers under eight chieftains against the white bannered troops on the right, since fire conquers metal. Send eight chieftains with black-bannered soldiers against the red-bannered rear contingent of the Liaos, since water conquers fire.

"Then send nine chieftains at the head of a green-bannered unit to cut into the foe's very center and take their yellow-bannered commander-in-chief. Wood conquers earth. Dispatch a unit carrying embroidered banners and dressed in flowery robes to crack the foe's sun contingent, and another unit bearing purple banners and dressed in silver armor to smash their moon contingent. On twenty-four carts, corresponding to the twenty-four solar terms, set cannon and shot, and bombard the center of the Tartar forces. Have Gongsun Sheng raise an astral storm and under its cover push directly up to the king of Great Liao.

"In this manner you will win total victory. But you must not operate during daylight. Wait until the darkness of night. Lead your troops yourself. Take

personal command of your central army. Exhort your men. One concerted effort will do it.

“My words must be kept secret. Defend the country and bring peace to the populace and never slacken.

“There is a limit to dealings between celestials and mortals. At this point we part on earth forever. When you come to abide in the Heavenly Palaces we shall meet again. Return quickly now to your camp. Do not linger.”

The Mystic Queen ordered the green-clad girl to serve tea. Song Jiang drank. She directed the girl to escort Star Lord Song Jiang back to camp. He kowtowed and expressed his deep gratitude, and left the hall. The girl led him down the stairs on the west side, then through the gate with the cinnabar-red lintel to the path. They crossed the stone bridge to the grove of pines. The green-clad girl pointed.

“The Liao soldiers are there. That is where you can break through.”

Song Jiang looked. The girl gave him a sudden push, and he awakened. He had been dreaming in his tent. In the stillness he heard the watchman's drum strike the hour. It was already the fourth watch.

He summoned his military advisor to interpret his dream. When Wu Yong entered the tent, Song Jiang asked: “Have you a plan for breaking the Zodiac Deployment?”

“I'm afraid not.”

“I saw the Mystic Queen in a dream and she gave me a secret method. I've decided upon it and would like your advice. We can call our chieftains and give them their assignments. For this battle we must use our best.”

“I'd like to hear it.”

Song Jiang described the method briefly. And as a result, the king of Great Liao surrendered, hands extended together, and Commander-in-Chief Wuyan lost his life. Truly, celestial strategy was employed and clever

tactics adopted; in an astral battle, the Song armies broke through the magic pass.

What method did Song Jiang use, how did he crack the deployment? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 89
Song Jiang Cracks the Foe's Deployment
Marshal Su Bestows the Emperor's Pardon

Word for word, Song Jiang related to Wu Yong the method given to him by the Mystic Queen of Ninth Heaven in his dream. When they had agreed upon a course of action they informed Commissioner Zhao. They had twenty-four gun carriages built of planks and iron sheeting, with oil-soaked faggots stored below in each and a cannon mounted above. Artillery men worked through the night to finish the job.

Song Jiang then assembled his commanders and issued his battle orders:

The central division cavalry in earth-yellow robes would, headed by General Two Spears Dong Ping, strike at the heart of the Water Planet contingent, while units under seven other chieftains would hit the seven black-bannered cavalry troops to the left and right.

The center of the Wood Planet position would be assaulted from the west by cavalry in robes of white and gold under Panther Head Lin Chong, while the seven green-bannered Liao units to the left and right were being attacked by seven other chieftains.

Cavalry in robes of fiery red, led by Qin Ming the Thunderbolt, would go against the Metal Planet position from the south, simultaneously with raids by seven other chieftains on the seven white-bannered Tartar sections to the left and right.

From the north, cavalry in robes of water-black, commanded by Two Rods Huyan Zhuo, would raid the Fire Planet position. At the same time seven other chieftains would charge the red-bannered enemy units to the left and right.

Cavalry in robes of woody green under Guan Sheng the Halberd would strike from the south at the Earth Planet position held by the Tartar commander-in-chief. The yellow-bannered troops of the foe's central army to the left and right would be assailed by eight other chieftains.

A contingent carrying embroidered banners and dressed in flowery robes would, commanded by seven chieftains, go against the Sun division on the left, while another seven chieftains leading a unit in purple robes and silver armor would move against the Tartar's Moon division on the right.

A fierce, bold force headed by six chieftains would cut through directly to the foe's center and capture the king. Another five would provide cover for the cannon carriages moving up to the middle.

The naval chieftains and their forces would sail as close to the battlefield as possible and lend support.

Eight five-sided flags would be issued, and the Song forces would deploy in their usual Nine-Unit Octagon.

When Song Jiang had finished issuing his orders, the commanders returned to their respective contingents and made ready. The twenty-four gun carriages were laden with their equipment and pushed to the front. Truly, it was a strategy that would startle Heaven and Earth, and shake the very fiends and demons.

Meanwhile, Wuyan, commander-in-chief of the Liao army, mystified by Song Jiang's failure, day after day, to give battle, dispatched pickets who advanced as far as the perimeters of the expeditionaries' camp. Song Jiang continued with his preparations and set a date for the offensive.

Then, late in the day, determined, he marched with his men. As they drew near the Liao emplacements, they spread out in a straight line. Powerful bowmen to the fore kept the enemy at a distance while the Song forces waited for evening.

At dusk, wind massed thick clouds, bringing darkness before it was night. Song Jiang ordered his troops to gag themselves with reed sticks and wait

for whistle signal. That night he sent forth four columns, retaining at the front only his earth-yellow horsemen. The columns dispersed the Liao pickets, then circled round towards the northern end of the enemy position.

A volley of cannon fire broke from the Song army about the first watch. Huyan Zhuo's contingent smashed in and took the Fire Planet. Guan Sheng then carved through the foe's central army and captured the Earth Planet. Lin Chong drove into the left army and seized the Wood Planet. Qin Ming grabbed the Metal Planet after cutting into the right army. Dong Ping, hitting the lead unit, took the Water Planet.

Gongsun Sheng waved his sword, casting an astral spell, and released five thunderbolts. The night wind blew with such force from the south that the tops of trees touched the ground. Stones rolled and sand flew, the God of Thunder streaked the sky with lightning. The twenty-four gun carriages, protected by five hundred shield warriors commanded by five chieftains, trundled into the Liao position. Ten Feet of Steel struck with her soldiers into the center of the Sun emplacement, while Sagacious Lu the Tattooed Monk drove with his men into the position of the Moon. Following the gun carriages, Lu Junyi the Magnate and his troops hit the Tartars' central army in a direct drive. Each unit pursued and slaughtered its own quarry.

Cannon roared in the night, thunder exploded overhead. In that murderous atmosphere rocks rolled and gravel flew. So great was the killing that the stars moved in the sky, the sun and moon grew dim. Fiends wept, demons cried, as soldiers clashed in wild confusion.

Wuyan the Tartar commander-in-chief was busily shifting his generals when he heard yells and tumult on all sides and the sounds of combat. By the time he mounted, the gun carriages had already reached his central army. Flames spurted into the sky as the boom of cannon shook the ground. Guan Sheng and his cavalry smashed through to the commander-in-chief's tent. Grasping his crescent-bladed halberd, Wuyan rode at Guan Sheng and gave battle. Zhang Qin the Featherless Arrow, flinging his stones, knocked down aides left and right. Many were injured, and fled for their lives, pursued by four chieftains who inflicted further devastation with their swords. His aides gone, Wuyan turned his steed and raced north. Guan Sheng galloped after.

Hua Rong, who saw the Tartar commander-in-chief run, also gave chase. Fitting an arrow to his bow, he let fly at Wuyan and hit him squarely in the back. The arrow clanged against the metal back plate, showering sparks. Before Hua Rong could shoot again, Guan Sheng caught up and swung his Green Dragon Halberd. The commander-in-chief was wearing three layers of armor—steel mail nearest his body, then a suit of sea animal hide, and all covered by a suit of golden chain mail. Guan Sheng's blow cut through the two outer layers. As he raised his blade to strike again, Wuyan closed in beneath its shadow and attacked with his crescent-bladed halberd.

They had fought four or five rounds when Hua Rong reached them. He sped an arrow at Wuyan's face. The commander-in-chief hurriedly dodged, but the missile nicked off the tip of his ear and scraped through his phoenix-plumed metal helmet. Wuyan fled.

Zhang Qin, in hot pursuit, flung a stone at Wuyan's head. It knocked him prone on his horse's back, but he continued riding away, trailing his halberd. Guan Sheng again caught up and again swing his Green Dragon Halberd. He sliced upwards through the commander-in-chief's waist, bones and all, right to his head. Wuyan tumbled to the ground. Hua Rong caught his fine horse and exchanged it for his own. Zhang Qin pierced the fallen Tartar with his lance. Thus expired a commander-in-chief, a gallant warrior, after only one hack of a halberd and one thrust of a lance! Poor Tartar hero. All passed as in a dream.

Sagacious Lu, leading Wu Song and five other chieftains, charged yelling into the Sun position. Yelu Dezhong, turning to flee, was tumbled from his steed when Wu Song broke the animal's neck with one blow of his blade. Wu Song seized the Liao general by the hair and cut off his head. Dezhong's two sons fled for their lives. The Sun position was smashed, its men scattered.

“We'll push on to the center, take the Liao king, and that will be the end of it,” said Sagacious Lu.

In the Moon position, the Royal Princess, hearing the murderous shouts on all sides, hurriedly mustered her female warriors to ride to the rescue. But they were beset at their tents by Ten Feet of Steel, brandishing her pair of

swords and leading Mistress Gu and five other chieftains. After many rounds, Ten Feet of Steel put aside her swords and closed with the princess, wrapping her arms around her waist. The two wrestled on horseback, tightly locked. Wang the Stumpy Tiger rode up and captured the princess. Mistress Gu and Sun the Witch killed and scattered the female soldiers, while the three men chieftains aided from the side. Poor highborn pampered princess, to thus fall captive, bound and tied!

Lu Junyi and his troops also cut into the Liao central army, killing Tartar officials and generals while Xie Zhen and Xie Bao cut down the “headquarters” flag. The king, closely guarded by his ministers and captains, withdrew towards the north. But his nephews Yelu Derong and Yelu Dexin were hacked from their mounts and killed. Nephew Yelu Dehua was captured. Nephew Yelu Dechong disappeared, no one knew where. The Liao army was completely surrounded, and the slaughter continued till the fourth watch. Not a single man of the more than two hundred thousand Tartar forces was left alive.

At daybreak the chieftains returned. Song Jiang sounded the trumpets recalling his men to camp. He directed that those who had taken captives turn them over and receive their rewards. Ten Feet of Steel came forward with the royal princess; Lu Junyi with nephew Yelu Dehua; Zhu Tong with Quli Chuqing the Water Planet; and other chieftains with five more generals. Heads of innumerable slain foes were also presented.

Song Jiang placed the eight prisoner generals in the charge of Commissioner Zhao of the Song central army. Captured horses were distributed among the chieftains.

The king of Great Liao, retreating in a panic to Yanjing, hurriedly ordered that the four gates of the city be closed, the moat defended, and that no one go out to confront the enemy. On learning that the king had withdrawn to Yanjing, Song Jiang directed his army to break camp. They marched to the Liao capital and surrounded it. Song Jiang invited Commissioner Zhao to observe the coming battle from the rear camp. He instructed his troops to

ring Yanjing with scaling ladders, cannon and shot, to build fortifications and prepare for the attack.

Very nervous, the king summoned his ministers to a conference. They all said: “The situation is dangerous. The best thing would be to submit to the Song empire.” The king agreed. He had a flag of surrender flown from the ramparts and dispatched an emissary to the Song camp with the message: “We will pay cattle and horses, pearls and gems, every year. We will never invade the Middle Kingdom again.”

Song Jiang led the emissary to Commissioner Zhao in the rear camp, where he repeated the Tartar proposal.

“This is a matter of prime national importance,” said Zhao. “Only the emperor can decide. I haven't the authority. You'll have to send a high minister to the Eastern Capital and request an audience. Only if the emperor formally approves the surrender in writing and pardons your crimes will we be able to end the war and withdraw our troops.”

The emissary returned to Yanjing and reported to the Liao king. The sovereign summoned his civil and military officials to confer. Chu Jian, the vice-premier, spoke.

“Our army is weak, our generals few, our soldiers are virtually gone. How can we resist the foe?” he said. “But in my humble opinion at this critical juncture we can still win men's hearts with bribes of gold and silks. I would be willing to go to Song Jiang's camp personally with lavish gifts. We'll have him halt the fighting and call off the attack on the city. At the same time we must give expensive presents to top ministers in the Eastern Capital and buy them over. Then they will speak for us before the emperor and obtain a milder disposition. Cai Jing, Tong Guan, Gao Qiu and Yang Jian have great power, and they're all rogues. The boy emperor listens to their advice. Bribe them with gold and silks and buy their support. We'll surrender and be pardoned. The Song forces will be pulled back and the war ended.”

The Liao king approved his vice-premier's proposal.

Chu Jian left the city the following day and proceeded to Song Jiang's camp. Song Jiang received him in his tent and asked what brought him. Chu Jian spoke of the surrender, and proffered a number of valuable gifts.

Song Jiang heard him out, then said: “If we hit your capital day after day, you can be sure we'll take it. And when we do, we won't spare even the roots of the grass* lest resistance grow again! I've seen your surrender flag, and I've called a halt to the fighting. Since ancient times in wars between two countries there has always been the right to capitulate. You are allowed to surrender. I, therefore, have checked my troops. I permit you to go to the imperial court to request sentencing and offer tribute. Do you think Song Jiang is the sort who can be bribed? Don't ever try that again!”

The Liao vice-premier was frightened. Song Jiang continued.

“Go to the imperial court and obtain a decree. I will keep my troops out of action temporarily. Go at once and come back quickly. Don't delay.”

Chu Jian thanked Song Jiang, left the camp, mounted his horse, returned to Yanjing and reported to the king. All the important ministers conferred and reached an agreement. The following day the king and his ministers contributed fine curios, gold and silver, precious gems and glittering pearls, and these were loaded on carts for delivering by the vice-premier and fifteen other officials to the Eastern Capital. Over thirty saddle horses were readied for the journey and a petition to the emperor written.

On leaving Yanjing the delegation first called on Song Jiang. He led Chu Jian to the presence of Commissioner Zhao and told him of the mission. Zhao entertained the emissary courteously. After consulting with Song Jiang, he also wrote out a report to the emperor regarding their military progress. He deputed Chai Jin and Xiao Rang to turn it in to the Council of Military Affairs for transmission to the throne, and directed them to accompany Chu Jian to the capital.

For many days they were on the road. At last, they arrived. Ten cartloads of valuable gifts, the carts and their drivers were put up in the official hostel. Chai Jin and Xiao Rang handed in to the Council of Military Affairs the report on the military situation.

“Our army has Yanjing surrounded,” they said. “We can take it at any time. The Liao king has hung a surrender flag on his ramparts and dispatched his vice-premier Chu Jian to petition for permission to capitulate, and to implore a pardon and an end to the war. We dare not decide on our own. We request an imperial decree.”

“Stay with Chu Jian in the official hostel for the time being,” said the council officer. “We here have to consider the long-range implications.”

Cai Jing, Tong Guan, Gao Qiu and Yang Jian, as well as the heads of the other departments, large and small, were all avid for gain. Chu Jian the emissary from Great Liao and his entourage, needing their assistance, called first on Cai Jing the premier and the three top ministers, then on the heads of various other departments. To all of these officials they paid bribes and presented gifts.

The following day the emperor conducted his morning audience in the palace. All the assembled high officials, civil and military, kowtowed. Tong Guan, head of the Council of Military Affairs, addressed the throne.

“Our vanguard leader Song Jiang has destroyed and driven back the Liao soldiers, and has advanced as far as Yanjing, their capital, which he now has surrounded. It is likely to fall to us at any time. The king of Liao has hung out a flag of surrender and seeks to capitulate. He has sent here his emissary Chu Jian with an offer to become our tributary. They will submit to our terms, but beg for a pardon and peace, and plead that we withdraw our troops and end the war. They promise to pay tribute every year without fail. None of the ministries dares to decide on its own. We request an imperial disposition.”

“If we talk peace and halt the hostilities, they will still exist as a nation,” said the sovereign. “What do you ministers think we should do?”

Cai Jing the premier stepped forward.

“We have reached a consensus,” he said. “Since ancient times the barbarians beyond our borders have never ceased harassing us. In our humble opinion, Liao should retain its identity as a nation and serve as a

buffer state in the north, the lips to our teeth, so to speak. Their annual tribute will be to our advantage. We should permit them to surrender on our terms, end the hostilities, and summon our troops back to defend the capital. But we ministers cannot presume to intervene. We beg Your Majesty to decide."

The emperor approved the premier's proposal. "Bring the Liao emissary before me," he directed.

The order was transmitted summoning Chu Jian and his entourage. They knelt in a line at the far end of the hall and fervently kowtowed. A minister brought forward their petition and unrolled it on the imperial table. The Royal Petition Speaker read it in a loud voice:

Yelu Hui, Ruling Lord of the Kingdom of Great Liao, kowtows one hundred times and states to Your Majesty: Born in the desert and raised in a barbarian land, I was unfamiliar with the great laws of Your Majesty and never studied the major social duties of civilized man. Deficient in culture and military talents, I was surrounded by vicious sycophants, men greedy and corrupt, short-sighted as rats but crafty as roebucks. I was ignorant, they rapacious. We invaded your borders, provoking your army's reprisal. Mere ants cannot stir Mount Taishan, rivers cannot be halted in their flow to the sea. Although we still possess a few desolate cities, we have not enough provisions for even half a year.

Today, I dispatch my emissary Chu Jian to venture into your awesome presence and surrender out lands and request punishment. If Your Majesty will pity us and spare our poor lives and not destroy our ancestral inheritance, your name shall be engraved on our bones. With the utmost exertion we shall serve forever as a guard of your borders and a buffer for your imperial reign. You will give new life to our young and old, and all our descendants will be eternally grateful. Yearly, we will pay tribute. We vow never to fail.

Trembling, we wait with bated breath! In sincerity and fear, we bow our heads and kowtow! Respectfully submitted.

The __day of the Winter Month in the fourth year of Xuan He

Yelu Hui, Ruler of the Kingdom of Great Liao

The ministers heard the petition with pleasure, and the emperor directed that imperial wine be served to the emissary. Chu Jian and his entourage presented tributes of gold and silks to the royal court. The emperor ordered that the Treasury receive them, and that it accept thereafter annual tribute of money and cattle. He, in turn, gave gifts of silk and feasted the emissaries in the Hall of Imperial Caterers. He instructed them to go back to Liao.

“I will dispatch an official who will accept your surrender,” he said.

Chu Jian and his party thanked the emperor, took their leave and returned to the official hostel. When the imperial audience ended they called at the various ministries to complete the necessary formalities and dispense more bribes.

Cai Jing reassured Chu Jian. “You go back,” he said. “The four of us will see to everything.”

Chu Jian thanked the premier and returned to the kingdom of Liao.

At the imperial audience the following day, Cai Jing entered at the head of the corps of officials. He petitioned the throne to pardon the Tartars. The emperor consented, and directed the scholars of the Hanlin Academy to draw up a document of pardon. He ordered Marshal Su to deliver and read it, and Commissioner Zhao to instruct Song Jiang to cease hostilities and return to the Eastern Capital. He was to release all prisoners, give back the captured cities, and restore to the Liao authorities whatever had been taken from their treasuries.

Royal court ended and the attending officials withdrew. The next day they called on Marshal Su and set a date for seeing him off. Su did not wish to delay the imperial decree. He had sedan-chairs and horses and attendants

readied for the journey, took his leave of the emperor, bid the ministry officials farewell, and departed for Liao with Chai Jin and Xiao Rang.

It was the depths of winter. Masses of clouds hung heavy in the sky. The envoys passed Chen Bridge Station and headed for the frontier. Snow blanketed the plains, powdering the trees and garbing the vast open spaces in silver. Through snow and wind, Marshal Su and his party wound their way forward.

The snow still had not melted when they reached the border area. Chai Jin and Xiao Rang sent a mounted courier on ahead to inform first Commissioner Zhao, and then Song Jiang, of their arrival. Carrying ceremonial wine, Song Jiang and an escort party travelled fifty *li* and knelt by the roadside in greeting. Marshal Su and the officials in his party were very pleased by this welcome. They were invited into the camp, where Song Jiang had a feast laid. He and the marshal discussed affairs in the imperial court.

“Cai Jian, Tong Guan, Gao Qiu, Yang Jian and other high ministry officials have all been bribed by the Tartars,” said Su. “Because of their urgings, the emperor has agreed to a surrender and an end to the fighting. Your troops are being called back to guard the capital.”

Song Jiang sighed. “I have no criticism of the court. It's just that our accomplishments here seem to have been in vain.”

“Don't distress yourself, General,” said the marshal. “When I return to the capital, I shall speak highly of you to the emperor.”

“And when he hears my testimony,” added Commissioner Zhao, “he surely will show his appreciation for your deeds.”

“There are a hundred and eight of us, doing our utmost for our country,” said Song Jiang. “We have no personal ambitions, or any desire to impose on His Majesty's benevolence. As long as we can remain together in our labors, that will be our greatest happiness. If you can propose that for us, Commissioner, we shall be deeply grateful.”

That day all dined and made merry. Only at evening did the feasting end. A messenger was dispatched to the king of the Liaos, notifying him to prepare to receive the decree.

The next day Song Jiang selected ten generals to escort Marshal Su and the decree into the kingdom of Liao. They were dressed in silk robes and golden armor and were fully armed. Guarding the marshal with a complement of three thousand infantry and cavalry, front and rear, they marched into the city.

The residents of Yanjing burned fragrant incense and hung festive lanterns before the doorway of every home. The king himself led his civil and military officials, all mounted and formally dressed, outside the South Gate to welcome the decree. Then they proceeded to the Royal Hall, where the ten Song generals arraigned themselves on either side, and Marshal Su took a stand to the left of the Dragon Pavilion. The king and his officials knelt before the hall. At a call from the Chief of Ceremonies, they kowtowed. The Liao chamberlain requested the decree. He then read it aloud:

The Emperor of Great Song proclaims: Since the days of our earliest kings and emperors there never was a sovereign who did not govern his subjects, nor subjects who did not sustain their sovereign. The Middle Kingdom has its ruler. Surely you barbarians have one too!

In violation of celestial laws, you Liaos have repeatedly invaded our borders. For this, you deserve to be instantly extinguished. But your petition has moved me to pity. I have not the heart to destroy you, and shall permit you to remain as a nation.

Effective from the day you receive this edict, all captured commanders shall be returned to Liao, your cities shall be restored once again to Liao rule.

But annual tribute must be delivered without fail. Respect our great country, venerate Heaven and Earth. This is the duty of you barbarians. Never forget!

We issue this decree so that all may know.

The __day of the Winter Month

of the fourth year of Xuan He

The king of the Tartars and his officials kowtowed and voiced their thanks. The imperial decree, on its dragon platform, was carried past, and the king and Marshal Su formally met. They exchanged courtesies, and the king invited the marshal to the rear of the hall, where a lavish feast of many delicacies was laid. While the Tartar officials poured wine and toasted their guests, beautiful girls played military airs on fifes and drums, or languorously turned in slow native dances.

When the banquet ended, Marshal Su and his party were provided quarters in the hostel for officials. Each member of the entourage received a gift.

The next day the king directed Chu Jian, his vice-premier, to go to the camp and invite Commissioner Zhao and Song Jiang into Yanjing to dine. On conferring with Military Advisor Wu Yong, Song Jiang decided it would be inappropriate for him to go. Commissioner Zhao, therefore, went without him to accompany Marshal Su. The king of the Tartars entertained the imperial emissaries at a grand banquet. Mulled grape wine was poured into silver goblets, delicious antelope meat was piled high on golden platters. Everywhere was tasty fruit and floral decorations of many hues.

And when it was nearly over, the king presented Marshal Su and Commissioner Zhao with curios on a golden platter. They feasted until far into the night.

To the accompaniment of martial music, the king and his officials the following day escorted Marshal Su and Commissioner Zhao out of the city and saw them off to camp. Again Vice-Premier Chu Jian was sent to call on Song Jiang. This time he brought gifts of cattle, sheep, horses, gold, silver and colorful silks. At a large meeting, he rewarded the troops and gave valuable presents to the commanders.

Song Jiang ordered that the Royal Princess and her company be released and permitted to go home. He also restored to Liao sovereignty the cities of Tanzhou, Qizhou, Bazhou and Youzhou. He saw off Marshal Su, who was returning to the capital. After reassembling his entire force, he dispatched his central army to serve as an escort for Commissioner Zhao. He then gave a banquet in the camp at which he rewarded his naval chieftains. He instructed them to sail back to the Eastern Capital and wait there for further orders.

He invited the premier of the Tartars and his deputy for a chat. The king directed premier Youxi Bojin and Vice-Premier Chu Jian to call on Song Jiang in his headquarters. Song Jiang received them in his tent, and host and guests took their respective places.

“Our soldiers have neared your capital's walls, our commanders are at your moat. Victory is at hand,” he said. “Originally, we had no intention of letting you surrender. We were going to smash in and obliterate everything. It would have been quite reasonable for us to do so. But, granting your request, I permitted you to appeal to the imperial court. The emperor took pity on you and decided not to wipe you out. He is allowing you to surrender, unconditionally, and is giving you very generous terms.

“I am about to return to the Eastern Capital. Don't make the mistake of thinking we couldn't have defeated you. Don't provoke us again. Pay your annual tribute without fail. Behave yourselves. Commit no more crimes. If our army has to come again, we won't let you off so easily!” The premier kowtowed and apologized for their crimes. In a softer tone, Song Jiang further advised them. They thanked him for his kindness and departed.

He put another contingent on the march for home, this one under woman commander Ten Feet of Steel. He directed Xiao Rang to write, and Jin Dajian to inscribe, a stone tablet commemorating the Song victory. The tablet was erected at the foot of Maoshan Mountain, fifteen *li* east of Yongqing County. It is still there today.

His remaining troops he divided into five columns and set a date for the march. But then Sagacious Lu burst into his tent and, clasping both hands together in greeting, addressed him.

“After I killed the Lord of the West, I fled to Yanmen County in Daizhou Prefecture, and Squire Zhao brought me to Mount Wutai, where I took refuge with the abbot and became a monk. Because I twice got drunk, knocked open the gates and rioted in the monastery, the abbot sent me to the Great Xiangguo Monastery in the Eastern Capital, and the abbot there gave me a job looking after their vegetable garden. But Marshal Gao wanted to have me killed because I rescued Lin Chong, and I became an outlaw. I got to know you, brother, and I've been with you for many years.

“I've been thinking of my first teacher, the abbot at Wutai. I haven't been to see him in all this time. I often remember what he told me—Even though it's my nature to kill and burn, I'll eventually be purified and become a saint. Since everything is quiet and peaceful at present, I'd like to ask for a few days off and pay my respects to him. I want to contribute the rewards I've accumulated to the monastery and request him to predict the future. You and the army go on ahead, brother. I'll catch up.”

Song Jiang was surprised. He thought a moment, then said: “I had no idea you knew this holy man. Why didn't you say so? We'll go with you and also pay our respects and ask him to foretell the future.”

He discussed it with the other chieftains. They all wanted to go, except for Gongsun Sheng who was a Taoist. Song Jiang decided, after talking it over with Military Advisor Wu Yong, to leave Jin Dajian, Huangfu Duan, Xiao Rang and Yue Ho to aid Deputy Vanguard General Lu Junyi in commanding the army, which was to continue returning by contingents to the capital.

“We'll take only a thousand men, and our chieftains,” said Song Jiang, “and go with Sagacious Lu to call on his abbot.”

Sagacious Lu expressed his willingness. The party prepared gifts of famous incense, fine silks, clothing and money, and set out for Mount Wutai.

Truly, they left aside their armor and weapons to wander through lonely forests. By the Terrace of Rain and Flowers they called on a high-ranking monk of great virtue, at the Hall of Virtue they saw gleaming lamps and ancient Buddhas.

And as a result, a single phrase scorned the search for name and fame, a few brief words kicked aside obsession with life and death.

How did Song Jiang and Sagacious Lu call upon the abbot? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 90
On Mount Wutai Song Jiang Consults the Seer
At Double Woods Crossing Yan Qing Shoots a Goose

Song Jiang and the chieftains, taking only a thousand men, arrived with Sagacious Lu at the foot of Mount Wutai, and there made camp. A messenger was sent up the mountain to announce their presence. Divesting themselves of their armor, Song Jiang and his brothers started climbing the slope, on foot, wearing their military robes of embroidered silk. As they neared the monastery archway, they heard the pealing of bells and the beating of drums. Monks in large number came out to welcome them. They courteously greeted Song Jiang, Sagacious Lu and the others. Many of them remembered Sagacious. The sight of the hundred or more chieftains, arrayed neatly in ranks behind Song Jiang, filled them with awe and admiration.

“The abbot is meditating and cannot be disturbed,” the elder told Song Jiang. “Please don't be offended, General.” He invited the visitors to sit a while in the reception room.

Tea was served. An attendant entered and said: “The abbot has just completed his meditations. He invites the general to join him in the Meditation Hall.”

Song Jiang and his entourage of over a hundred walked to the hall. The abbot came quickly down the steps and led them inside, where they exchanged courtesies. Song Jiang looked at the prelate. He was a man in his sixties. His hair and eyebrows were completely white. He had fine bones and the air of one who has lived long in remote mountains.

When all the chieftains had entered, Song Jiang requested the abbot to be seated. Then he and the chieftains lit incense and bowed. Sagacious Lu did the same.

“In the years you've been gone you've killed and burned just like before,” the abbot berated Sagacious.

The Tattooed Monk remained silent.

Song Jiang stepped forward and said: “I have long known of your virtue, Abbot, but I never was fortunate enough to have the chance to see your noble visage. A campaign against the Liao has brought me to this region, and so I am able to offer homage to a great prelate. It gives me the utmost happiness. Sagacious Lu has been my brother. Although he has killed and set fires, he has never harmed good people, and his heart has been pure. It was he who led us here to pay our respects.”

“High-ranking prelates who have called here have spoken at times of mundane affairs,” said the abbot. “I have long known of your acting in Heaven's behalf, General, and your loyal heart. I know too how much emphasis your commanders place on chivalrous conduct. Following you, my disciple Sagacious Lu of course could do no wrong.”

Song Jiang fulsomely expressed his thanks.

Sagacious Lu presented a packet of gold and silver and silks to his teacher, the abbot.

“Where did you get these things, my pupil? Immoral riches I can never accept.”

“These are rewards I've accumulated. They're of no use to me. I've brought them especially for you, Teacher, to use for the benefit of all.”

“They would mean little to our monks. I'll use the money to buy a set of sutras. Expiate your sins and you'll reach a state of purity.”

Sagacious Lu thanked the abbot. Song Jiang, too, presented money and silks. The prelate adamantly refused to take them.

“If you won't accept our gifts, Teacher,” said Song Jiang, “at least you can use them to provide vegetarian meals for the monks.”

The callers rested at the monastery on Mount Wutai all that day, and the abbot entertained them at a meatless meal. Of that no more need be said.

After another vegetarian repast the next day, bells pealed and drums pounded in the temple on Mount Wutai. The abbot summoned his monks to hear him discourse and make predictions. Cassocks draped over their shoulders and carrying their cushions, they filed into the temple and sat down. Song Jiang, Sagacious Lu, and the other chieftains stood on either side.

A stone chime sounded, and two red gauze lanterns lighted the abbot to his chair on the dais. Holding a stick of smoldering incense, he offered a prayer.

“With this incense, I humbly wish ten thousand years to the emperor, with the empress at his side, and a thousand autumns to the prince. May the imperial children flourish, and the officials rise constantly in rank. Let there be peace throughout the land, and may the people be happy at their labors.”

The prelate took another stick of incense. “May our patrons be at ease in body and mind, live for a thousand circuits of the sun, and their fame last forever.”

Taking a third stick, the abbot intoned: “May the country be peaceful and the people serene for years to come, the five grains abundant, the three religions glorious, with calm on all four sides, and everything exactly as wished.”

The prelate then seated himself, while the monks rose and stood, palms of their hands together. Song Jiang advanced with a stick, bowed and, palms together, addressed the abbot.

“I have a question. I wonder if I dare ask?”

“What is your proper query?”

“One's life on earth is limited, though suffering is without end. Man's body is weak. His greatest concern is life and death. I've come here to ask my fate.”

The abbot's reply was cryptic: “By the six senses bound, by the four elements restricted, several times you've tumbled in the flames of battle. Alas, all living things afloat in this world futilely howl in mire and sand.”

Song Jiang bowed and stood in attendance. The chieftains also advanced with incense and bowed.

“We pray only that we may live and die together,” they said, “and meet always in future incarnations.”

The monks then withdrew and the abbot invited his guests to dine on vegetarian fare in the Hall of Clouds. After the meal, Song Jiang and Sagacious Lu accompanied the abbot to Meditation Hall. They chatted until nightfall.

“Sagacious and I had hoped to spend many days with you, Teacher, dispelling our ignorance,” said Song Jiang. “But as leader of a large army, I cannot stay too long. I do not understand your pronouncement. Since we're about to return to the capital, I pray you, Abbot, tell me what the future holds in store.”

On a sheet of paper, the prelate wrote four phrases: *When the shadows of the wild geese pass, in the east there is no unity. Cocking an eye he scores his mark, at Double Woods full prosperity.*

The abbot handed the paper to Song Jiang. “Your whole life is here, General. Preserve this prediction well. In time it will come true.”

Song Jiang looked at the paper. He couldn't make head or tail of it.

“I'm a stupid person. I don't understand. Please explain. Shall I expect good or ill?”

“These are mystic Buddhist words. Think them over. I cannot tell you clearly, lest I reveal Heaven's secrets.”

The prelate then called Sagacious Lu before him and said: “I shall soon be leaving you forever, my pupil, to go to my just reward. You, too, I give a four phrase prediction. Keep it and use it all your life.”

And the abbot wrote: *Take Xia when you encounter him. Seize La when you meet. When you hear the tide, round out the circle. When you see the tide, in silence rest.*

Bowing, Sagacious accepted the paper. He read it several times and concealed it on his person. Again he bowed and thanked his teacher.

“Remember these words, my pupil,” said the abbot. “Don't forget your original form.”

All retired to rest for the night. The following day, Song Jiang and Sagacious Lu, plus Wu Yong and the chieftains, bid the abbot farewell. The abbot and all the monks saw them off as far as the mountain arch of the monastery.

Song Jiang and his entourage hurried through the night and returned to the main army, where they were met by Lu Junyi and Gongsun Sheng. Song Jiang told them what had transpired on Mount Wutai and showed them abbot's prediction. They couldn't decipher it either.

“How could the likes of us hope to understand such secret religious Words,” exclaimed Xiao Rang. Everyone sighed regretfully.

Song Jiang ordered the army to march. All three divisions headed for the Eastern Capital. After several days on the road, they reached a place called Double Woods Crossing. Happening to look up at the sky, Song Jiang saw several lines of wild geese. But they were not in their usual formations. Some flew high, some low, and all were squawking in alarm.

While puzzling over this, he heard cries of admiration further up the line of march, and sent a mounted scout to inquire. The man quickly returned and reported that Yan Qing the Prodigy had been practicing with his bow. Every arrow had hit a goose, bringing down well over a dozen, thus arousing the watchers' acclaim.

Song Jiang directed that Yan Qing come to him immediately. The Prodigy wore a broad-brimmed white felt hat and a parrot-yellow tunic quilted with flaxen floss. Astride a roan desert steed and carrying his bow and arrows, he cantered up to halt before Song Jiang, the dead geese hanging over his horse's rump. He dismounted and stood waiting.

“Was that you, shooting geese just now?”

“I needed practice and saw them flying overhead. I didn't expect every arrow to score a hit. I must have brought down more than a dozen.”

“A military man ought to practice his archery, and you're an expert at it. I was just thinking—these geese leave the Tianshan Range in autumn and fly south across the Yangzi with reeds in their beaks to where it's warm and they can find food, and don't return till the following spring. They're the most virtuous of birds. They travel in flocks of up to half a hundred, flying in orderly ranks, with the leader at the head and the inferiors behind. They never leave the flock, and post sentinels when they rest at night. If a gander loses his goose, or a goose her gander, they never mate again. These fowl possess all five attributes—virtue, righteousness, propriety, knowledge and faith.

“If a goose dies in flight, all utter cries of mourning, and none will ever harass a bereaved bird. This is virtue. When a fowl loses its mate, it never pairs again. This is righteousness. They fly in a definite order, each automatically taking its place. This is propriety. They avoid hawks and eagles, silently crossing the passes with reed sticks in their beaks. This is knowledge. They fly south in autumn and north in spring, every year without fail. This is faith.

“How could you have the heart to harm such admirable creatures? Those geese passing in the sky, all helping one another, are very much like our

band of brothers. Yet you shoot them down. How would we feel if it were some of our brothers we had lost? You must never hurt these virtuous birds again!”

Yan Qing listened in penitent silence. Emotionally, Song Jiang composed and recited a poem:

Jagged peaks draped in mist,

Three lines of geese across the sky.

Suddenly in flight a mate is lost—

Cold moon, chill breeze, a mournful cry.

He felt extremely depressed. That night, the army camped at Double Woods Crossing. Song Jiang brooded in his tent. He called for paper and writing brush and composed these lines:

Far from the startled scattered flock

In the vast clear firmament

A wild goose flies.

A lone shadow seeking a sheltering pond

Finding naught but dry grass, sandy wastes,

Open water, endless skies.

No poet,

I can only set down these few thoughts.

Dusk in an empty ravine,

Campfire smoke in an ancient fort,

I'm more dejected than I can say!

Though we've cleared the reeds

We've no place to spend the night.

When, oh when, will we see once more

The Yumen Gate to our homeland!

Drearily, I sob and sigh,

Longing to depart this hateful river.

Would that spring come soon again,

With swallows nesting in the beams.

Song Jiang showed what he had written to Wu Yong and Gongsun Sheng. His sadness and loneliness were quite apparent. He was very unhappy. That night Wu Yong plied him with wine until he was drunk.

The next morning they mounted and continued the southward march. It was early winter, and the desolate landscape deepened Song Jiang's gloom.

After many a day, they finally neared the capital. They made camp at Chen Bridge Station and awaited the emperor's directive.

Marshal Su and Commissioner Zhao, who had reached the city first with the central army, praised Song Jiang's deeds to the sovereign, and reported that he and his forces were already outside the pass in the environs of the capital. Commissioner Zhao related the arduous exploits of Song Jiang and his generals in the border region. The monarch warmly voiced his approbation. He instructed the royal chamberlain to summon them to his presence, and permit them to enter the capital in full armor.

On being notified by the royal chamberlain, Song Jiang and his chieftains—one hundred and eight in all—donned armor and helmets, carried their weapons, hung gold and silver slabs on their silken robes, and filed into the palace through the East Glory Gate. His Majesty received them in the Hall of Culture and Virtue, where they kowtowed and shouted long live the emperor. Their magnificent military apparel impressed the monarch. Only Wu Yong, Sagacious Lu and Wu Song wore the clothes of their religious calling. The sovereign was very pleased.

“I have heard much of your hardships on the expedition and your dedication in the border region. I was greatly concerned over the many casualties you suffered,” he aid.

Again kowtowing, Song Jiang replied: “Thanks to the good fortune emanating from Your Majesty, the border region is now at peace. Some of my generals were wounded, but none seriously. The sandy kingdom of the Liao has already capitulated. This, too, is a result of Your Majesty's benevolent teaching.” He bowed once more and expressed his gratitude.

The emperor wanted to confer on Song Jiang a rank of nobility, but Premier Cai Jing and Chancellor of Military Affairs Tong Guan advised against it.

“Our borders are still troubled,” they said. “He should not be raised. Give him an honorary title of Defender of Righteousness, let him bear imperial arms, and put him in charge of guarding the palace. As to Lu Junyi, he can be called Military Teacher and be permitted to bear imperial weapons; make him head of military training. Wu Yong and the rest of the thirty-six can

become full commanders, Zhu Wu and the remainder of the seventy-two can be vice-commanders. We can also spread some money among the soldiers.”

The sovereign agreed. He instructed the Council of Military Affairs to grant the appropriate ranks and issue the monetary rewards. Song Jiang and his chieftains kowtowed and thanked the emperor for his benevolence. The monarch ordered the Imperial Caterers to give a banquet in their honor. When it was over, Song Jiang was presented with a silken robe, a set of gold armor, and a fine horse. Lu Junyi and the others were also given gifts drawn from the Treasury. All expressed their thanks. They withdrew from the palace through the West Glory Gate, mounted and returned to camp, there to await further orders from the imperial court.

Gongsun Sheng, the following day, came to Song Jiang's tent. He placed his palms together and bowed in the Taoist fashion to Song and the other chieftains.

“My teacher Luo the Sage instructed me to return to the mountain and continue my studies after escorting you safely to the capital. You agreed to this, brother,” he said to Song Jiang. “Now that you have returned, famous and in triumph, I must not linger. I shall say farewell, go back to the mountain, and spend the rest of my days studying the Way and caring for my old mother.”

Song Jiang couldn't renege on his promise. With tears in his eyes he said: “Our days together were like opening flowers. Our parting is like flowers that fall. I gave my word, but it breaks my heart to see you go!”

“I would be lacking love and respect if I left you halfway. But you're already famous and a success. This is no place for a poor Taoist. You must give your consent.”

When all Song Jiang's urgings proved in vain, he ordered a large farewell banquet. All sighed as they raised their cups. Tears flowed with the wine. Gongsun refused gifts of gold and silks. The chieftains, over his protests, stuffed them in his luggage.

The next day he took his leave. He wore hemp sandals and carried his luggage on his back. Palms together, he bowed his head, then set off towards the north.

For several days Song Jiang grieved. His tears fell like rain.

New Year's Day was fast approaching, and the officials prepared to celebrate. Premier Cai was afraid that if Song Jiang and all his chieftains were present at the court festivities the emperor would see them and be reminded to make important use of them. He therefore persuaded the monarch to limit the invitations to Song Jiang and Lu Junyi, the only two who held imperial posts. The other chieftains who had been on the expedition against the Tartars had no official ranks. They were “excused” from attending lest they “alarm the sovereign.”

On New Year's Day the emperor held court, and the officials came to offer their congratulations. Song Jiang and Lu Junyi, both in formal dress, were in the Waiting Room for the morning imperial audience, and kowtowed with the officials. The emperor, in fringed hat and wearing a jade-encrusted girdle, was seated on his throne, attended by his high ministers. But neither Song Jiang and Lu Junyi nor the officials were allowed to enter the imperial hall. They could only observe the jewelled ornaments and fine trappings of the ministers, coming and going as they toasted the sovereign.

This went on from dawn until noon. Only then were those outside given a little imperial wine with which to express their thanks. Then the officials withdrew and the emperor concluded his court.

Song and Lu left the palace, removed their court dress, mounted their horses and returned to camp, their faces dark. Wu Yong and the other chieftains were waiting for them. As they offered congratulations on the holiday, they observed Song Jiang's gloomy expression. The hundred or more of them lined up on either side. Song Jiang sat in silence, his head lowered.

“You've just been congratulating the emperor, brother. Why so dejected?” Wu Yong queried.

Song Jiang sighed. “I must have been both unlucky. We went through so much hardship to smash the Liao, but I've obtained very little for you brothers. I myself have been made only a petty official.”

“Though you haven't yet achieved good fortune, why be downcast? All things are pre-ordained. There's no need to worry.”

Li Kui the Black Whirlwind spoke. “You still haven't thought this out, brother! When we were in Liangshan Marsh, nobody could push us around. But all you could talk about was amnesty, amnesty! Now that we've got it we have nothing but aggravation. We brothers are all here together. Let's go back to Liangshan Marsh, I say, and be happy!”

“You're talking wild again, black beast,” Song Jiang shouted. “All of us have been made officers in the imperial army. You don't understand these things. You're still a rebel at heart!”

“If you don't listen to me, brother,” Li Kui insisted, “all you'll get is more abuse!”

Everyone laughed. They raised their cups and congratulated Song Jiang on the New Year. They drank until the second watch before breaking up.

The next day, with a dozen horsemen, Song Jiang entered the city and offered congratulations on the New Year to Marshal Su, Commissioner Zhao, and various ministry officials. Many persons observed this, and one of them reported to Cai Jing. The following day, after obtaining the emperor's approval, Cai had notices posted on every city gate!

They read as follows: *All officers and commanders of expeditionary forces shall remain in camp and wait for orders. They are not to enter the city without specific instructions in writing from higher headquarters. Whoever disobeys shall be punished according to military law.*

One of the notices was posted at Chen Bridge Gate, and a person who saw it told Song Jiang. His depression deepened. The chieftains were furious. Except for Song Jiang, all seethed with rebellion.

Several naval chieftains requested a conference with Wu Yong. Escorted on board a warship, he met Li Jun, Zhang Heng, Zhang Shun and the three Ruan brothers.

“The imperial court doesn't keep its word. Treacherous ministers wield power and block the correct path,” they said. “Although Brother Song Jiang has broken the Liao, he's been made only a petty palace functionary. He hasn't been able to obtain any raise in rank or rewards for the rest of us. Now a notice has been posted forbidding us entry into the city. We think those evil ministers are trying to split us up, to transfer us away. We'd like you to support us. If we ask brother, he'll flatly refuse. Our idea is to fight a bloody battle, pillage the city clean, go back to Liangshan Marsh and become brigands again! That would be best!”

“Brother Song Jiang will certainly refuse. You're wasting your time. If the arrow point doesn't leave the bow, the shaft is sure to snap. The headless snake cannot crawl. How can I propose such a thing? We can't do anything until brother is willing. If he doesn't agree and you rebel on your own, you'll never succeed.”

It was plain that the military advisor would not be their advocate. The six naval chieftains fell silent.

Returning to camp, Wu Yong chatted with Song Jiang about military affairs. Then he said: “Our brothers usually were free to come and go as they pleased, and they were quite happy with the situation. Yet today, even though we've been amnestied and you've been made an official, they're suddenly been restricted. They can't accept it. They're very angry.”

Song Jiang was startled. “Has someone been saying something to you?”

“No one had to say anything. It's common sense. As the old saying goes: 'People want wealth and position, they hate being poor and lowly.' You've only to look at their faces to see their mood.”

“The brothers may want to revolt, Military Advisor, but though I die and go to the Nether World I'll never abandon my loyalty to the emperor!”

The next morning Song Jiang summoned all his chieftains for a conference. When they had assembled before his tent, he addressed them.

“After starting in life as a petty functionary in Yuncheng, I committed a major crime. Thanks to your support, brothers, I became your leader and, today, a government official. Since ancient times it has been said: 'A mature man is not without restraint; without restraint one cannot achieve maturity.' The court has its reasons for posting those notices. You're not to go into the city without permission. Many of us in the mountain forests were just rough soldiers. Whoever stirs up trouble will surely be dealt with according to law. Our reputation will be damaged. It's lucky for us we're not allowed into the city. If you feel so hampered that you must revolt, cut off my head first! Otherwise I won't be able to face the world. I'll have to kill myself! The choice is yours!”

At Song Jiang's words, the chieftains wept. They reaffirmed their fealty, and the meeting disbanded.

From then on, unless on official business, none of them went into the city. As the first lunar festival drew near, in the Eastern Capital, as was the annual custom, the streets were festooned with lanterns. In the camp, Yan Qing the Prodigy had a proposal for Yue Ho the Iron Throat.

“The emperor and the people are celebrating the New Year with fireworks and lantern displays. Let's disguise ourselves and go in and have a look.”

“If you're going to see the lanterns,” someone said, “You'll have to take me.”

Yan Qing turned around. It was Li Kui the Black Whirlwind.

“There's no use trying to fool me,” said Li Kui. “I heard everything.”

“We can take you easily enough,” said Yan Qing, “but I'm worried about that temper of yours. You're sure to stir up trouble. The Council of Military Affairs has posted notices forbidding us to enter the city. If you create a row, we'll fall right into their trap.”

“I won't cause any fuss. I'll do whatever you say.”

“All right, then. Dress up as a traveller tomorrow, and you can come.”

Black Whirlwind was delighted.

The next day, in the garb of travellers, the three set out. Yue Ho and Shi Qian, whom they happened to meet, sneaked in first. Yan Qing couldn't get rid of Li Kui and had no choice but to let the Black Whirlwind accompany him. They dared not enter the Chen Bridge Gate. Making a detour around the capital, they went in through Fengqiu Gate.

Hand in hand they strolled towards the amusement center. Li Kui, hearing the sound of music, insisted on going in. He and Yan Qing pushed through the crowds to where a performer was reciting a ballad based on an episode in the novel *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms.* It was about the famous hero of antiquity, Guan Yu, who had been struck in the left arm by an arrow. The poison had seeped into his bone.

“If you want me to cure you,” said the doctor, “you'll have to put your arm through iron hoops attached to a bronze rod and let me bind it tight. I'll slice open your flesh and cut out the three tenths of the bone that's been poisoned. After putting growth-promoting medicine inside, I'll sew you up with oiled thread and apply ointment to the outside. In less than half a month you'll be as good as new. But the operation is very painful.”

Guan Yu laughed. “Even death doesn't daunt a real man. Would I worry about a mere arm? No need for your rod and hoops. Just slice away!”

He called for his chess-board, and played a game with a friend, while the doctor carved the bone and extracted the poison. Guan Yu never blanched. He chatted and laughed with his friend all the while.

When the ballad reciter reached this point, Li Kui shouted out: “Now that's what I call a brave man!”

The startled audience turned to stare. Yan Qing hastily restrained him.

“How can you be so dumb, brother? An amusement center is no place to make a big disturbance over a little thing!”

“I couldn't help it. I was carried away.”

Yan Qing dragged him out. They left the amusement center and walked along a cross-town street. A man was slinging bricks and tiles at another man's house.

“Twice I've loaned you money,” cried the person under attack. “Not only do you refuse to pay back but, out of a clear blue sky, you bombard my house!”

Aroused by the injustice, Li Kui wanted immediately to intervene. Yan Qing flung both arms around his waist. Li Kui glared.

“There's a debt question between him and me,” said the brick thrower. “What's it to you? I'm going south of the Yangzi any day now in an expedition against the bandits, so you'd better not rile me! It's sure death down there! I'd just as leave fight you and be killed here! I end up in a coffin either way!”

“What's this about going south?” said Black Whirlwind. “We haven't had any mustering of troops or orders to commanders.”

Yan Qing calmed the combatants and, with Li Kui, left the cross-town street. Traversing a lane, they saw a small tea-shop, went in and sat down. As they were sipping their beverage, they got into conversation with an old fellow, opposite.

“Can you tell us something, grandpa?” said Yan Qing. “We ran into a brawling soldier just now who said he was leaving soon on an expedition across the Yangzi. Where exactly are they going?”

“Oh, you don't know? A bandit there named Fang La has rebelled. He's occupied eight prefectures from Muzhou to Runzhou and twenty-five counties. He calls this territory a nation. Sooner or later the rebels will

attack Yangzhou. The emperor has ordered Military Governor Zhang and District Commander Liu to clean them out."

Yan Qing and Li Kui paid their bill and hurried back to camp, where they reported their conversation to Wu Yong. The military advisor was very pleased. He told Song Jiang about it.

"Being idle here is not right," said Song Jiang. "We should ask Marshal Su to petition the emperor to let us join the expedition."

He discussed the matter with his chieftains. They all liked the idea.

The next day Song Jiang changed his clothes and went into town with Yan Qing. At the residency of Marshal Su they dismounted. They were announced and, on the marshal's instructions, ushered in. Song Jiang bowed in greeting.

"Why are you dressed in civilian garb, General?"

"The Military Affairs Council has forbidden all expeditionary officers to enter the city unless summoned, and I wanted to see Your Excellency privately. I hear that Fang La, south of the Yangzi, has rebelled, occupied several prefectures, and calls himself a king. He's advanced as far as Runzhou. It's expected that, sooner or later, he'll cross the river and attack Yangzhou. My forces are idle, just camped here. It's not right. I'd like to lead them on an expedition against Fang La and demonstrate our loyalty. I pray Your Excellency petition the emperor for us."

Marshal Su was very pleased. "Exactly what I'd been thinking, General. This is of great importance to our country and our people. Why shouldn't I petition the emperor? Go back. I'll do it first thing in the morning. He's sure to give it serious attention."

Song Jiang bid the marshal farewell, returned to camp, and informed his brothers.

When the marshal attended the early court the next day, he found the monarch conferring with his civil and military officials in the Mantled in

Incense Hall. The emperor was speaking of how Fang La was ravaging the south, how he had occupied twenty-five counties in eight prefectures, given himself a dynastic title, had rebelled and proclaimed himself king. It was only a question of time until he attacked Yangzhou.

“I have directed Governor Zhang and District Commander Liu to lead an expedition, but so far I haven't seen any results,” the emperor said.

“The bandits are a serious menace,” Marshal Su agreed. “Why not send, in addition, Song Jiang who defeated the Liao Tartars? The two combined forces can surely wipe out the rebels and win a great victory.”

“Your proposal suits my purposes excellently,” said the monarch. He ordered that the Chancellor of Military Affairs be summoned to hear his decree.

Governor Zhang and his staff officers Cong and Geng requested that Song Jiang and his troops go as the vanguard of the expedition. When the Chancellor of Military Affairs had received his orders, Song Jiang and Lu Junyi were sent for. They kowtowed before the emperor.

The sovereign proclaimed Song Jiang Commander-in-Chief of the Southern Pacification, and Vanguard of the Expedition Against Fang La. He named Lu Junyi as second in command. To each he awarded a gold belt, a silk robe, golden armor, a fine horse, and good cloth for twenty-five garments. The other generals were given cloth and silver, and a promise of a rise in rank and status upon displays of merit in battle. Silver was given to the various chieftains. All these awards were to be drawn from the official treasury. A time limit was set for the departure of the expeditionary force. Song Jiang and Lu Junyi begged to take leave of the emperor.

“You have a carver of jade seals, Jin Dajian, and an experienced judge of horses, Huangfu Duan,” said the monarch. “Leave those two for our use.”

Song Jiang and Lu Junyi again kowtowed. They thanked the emperor, left the palace, mounted their steeds and headed for camp. They rode side by side in high spirits.

In a marketplace outside the city they saw a man shaking out a rhythm on a pair of wooden castanets. They clattered with the movements of his hand. Song Jiang had never seen such a contraption.

He had a soldier ask the fellow: “What is that thing?”

“It's called a Foreign Clapper. When you shake your hand, it makes a noise.”

Song Jiang composed a poem on the spot:

Now a low sound, now a high,

Clackety-clack into the sky,

Though heroic strength pervades the air,

If not used, it's wasted there.

From his seat in the saddle, he laughed. “That Foreign Clapper is like you and me. Between us, we have heaven-piercing capabilities. But if no one shakes us into action, how can we perform any resounding deeds?”

He told his aides to give the man some silver, and they rode on. Song Jiang continued to chat with Lu Junyi. Again poetic images rose in his mind, and he composed another verse:

Though by the finest craftsmen made,

Feeble chime the hearts of jade.

Only taken well in hand,

Will they ring throughout the land.

“Why do you say that, brother?” Lu protested. “Our talents are equal to those of any general, past or present. If that weren't so, what good would it do to take us in hand?”

“You're wrong, brother. If Marshal Su hadn't petitioned for us, would the emperor have given us such important assignments? A man who gains fame shouldn't forget his benefactors.”

Lu felt the reprimand was justified. He had nothing more to say.

Returning to camp, they convened a meeting of the chieftains and directed that as many horses and as much armor as possible be assembled in preparation for an expedition against Fang La. The next day the emperor's awards were drawn from the treasury and distributed, and Jin Dajian and Huangfu Duan were sent off to serve the imperial court.

Song Jiang instructed the armada to leave first, directing the naval chieftains to put the craft in ship-shape condition. They were to sail towards the Yangzi. The cavalry chieftains were told to ready their weapons and armor. When the expedition started, land and water forces would proceed together.

Premier Cai Jing suddenly arrived at the camp. He demanded that Xiao Rang the Master Hand be given into his service. The following day District Commander Wang appeared and asked for Iron Throat Yue Ho. He said he'd heard that Yue Ho was a good singer and he needed such a person in his residency.

Song Jiang had no choice but to consent, and he saw the two of them off. He had now lost five brothers, and he felt very badly. He finished making plans with Lu Junyi and ordered the contingents to get ready to march.

The revolt of Fang La, south of the Yangzi, had commenced some time before. It developed gradually. No one had expected it to turn into such a large affair. Fang La had been a woodcutter in the hills of Shezhou Prefecture. One day, while washing his hands in a stream, he observed his reflection in the water. He seemed to be wearing a crown and a dragon robe. Fang La therefore announced he was destined to be a king, and started his rebellion.

He established a Precious Hall in the Pangyuan Cavern in Qingxi County, and built a Royal Garden and Palace. He set up smaller palaces in Muzhou and Shezhou, and designated civil and military ranks, created ministries, appointed premiers and generals, and a whole panoply of ministers. (When reconquered by the Song Dynasty Muzhou became Yanzhou, Shezhou became Huizhou. Today they are called Jiante and Wuyuan.)

Subsequently, Fang La took Runzhou, present-day Zhenjiang. By then he controlled a total of eight prefectures containing twenty-five counties. The eight prefectures were: Shezhou, Muzhou, Hangzhou, Suzhou, Changzhou, Huzhou, Xuanzhou and Runzhou. Jiaxing, Songjiang, Chongte and Haining at that time were counties, and were among the twenty-five under the eight prefectures. Fang La proclaimed himself king and appointed provincial, prefectural and departmental officials. This was no small organization. It was infinitely larger than some gang of bandits in the hills.

Fang La fulfilled a heavenly prophecy which read: *Ten thousand plus a dot and the last winter month shall a monarch be. Across the Zheshui River, in Wuxing, proclaim aloud your sovereignty.* A dot above the character for “ten thousand” converts it into “fang.” The last winter month is known as “la.” Thus “Fang La” the king. Of course his eight prefectures south of the Yangzi were much smaller in area than the kingdom of Liao.

Song Jiang, meanwhile, fixed a date for his march and bid farewell to the various ministers. Marshal Su and Commissioner Zhao saw the army off personally, and rewarded the troops. The naval chieftains had already sailed their boats from the Sishui River into the Huai, and were moving in the

direction of the Huai'an Dyke. They would ultimately assemble at Yangzhou.

Taking a respectful leave of the marshal and the commissioner, Song Jiang and Lu Junyi set forth. The army was divided into five columns. Their destination was also Yangzhou. The march was without incident, and the vanguard unit reached Huai'an County and made camp. The Yangzhou prefectural officials provided a banquet for Song Jiang and quarters in the city when he arrived.

“Fang La has a powerful army. You mustn't underestimate him,” they said. “Ahead is the Yangzi, which flows 9,300 *li* before emptying into the sea. That's the first dangerous barrier you have to cross. Then you come to Runzhou, which is held by Fang La's Minister of Military Affairs Lu Shinang and twenty-four commanders whose job it is to defend the banks. Unless you can take Runzhou, you'll have a hard time withstanding Fang La.”

Song Jiang called Military Advisor Wu Yong into conference. How were they going to cross the Yangzi? Their campaign against the Liao Tartars had been on dry land. It required no contribution from the naval chieftains. But now a navy was indispensable.

“There are two islands in the river near Runzhou—Jinshan Hill and Jiaoshan Hill,” said Wu Yong. “Send a few brothers there to spy out the approaches to the city and learn what kind of boats are needed to get across.”

Summoning his naval chieftains, Song Jiang said: “Which of you brothers will find out about water approaches and think of a plan for getting our soldiers over?”

Four men stepped forward and proclaimed their willingness.

And because these scouts went forth, corpses were piled as high as Beigu Mountain and the Yangzi River flowed red with blood. The sacked city of Runzhou was left an abode for naught but weeping ghosts and howling demons, and the Jinshan Monastery was turned upside down. A great army

soared over Black Dragon Range, an armada swallowed White Goose Shore.

How did Song Jiang's forces proceed against Fang La? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 91
Zhang Shun Stages a Night Ambush at Jinshan Monastery
Song Jiang Cleverly Takes Runzhou City

The mighty Yangzi has two large tributaries—the Hanyang River and the Xunyang River. It passes many places in its 9,300 *li* march from Sichuan to the sea. For this reason it is called the Long River of Ten Thousand *Li.* In the Wu and Chu areas there are two islands in the river. One was known as Jinshan Hill, the other Jiaoshan Hill. On Jinshan Hill a monastery wound up the slope into the heights, and so was called the Monastery Embracing a Hill. The monastery on Jiaoshan Hill was hidden in a declivity, and so was called the Hill-Embraced Monastery. The islands were precisely on the dividing line between the Chu and Wu areas. On the north bank was Yangzhou, on the south bank was Runzhou—today called Zhenjiang.

At Runzhou, Fang La's Minister of Military Affairs, Lu Shinang, defended the river banks. Lu was a rich man from Shezhou who obtained his position as a reward for contributing money and grain to Fang La. When he was young he studied books on military strategy. He used a snake lance eighteen feet long with outstanding skill. Under him were twelve commandants, better known as “The Twelve Gods South of the Yangzi.” They cooperated in defending the shore in each of the twelve prefectures.

Lu was general of a total of fifty thousand southern soldiers. They held the banks. More than three thousand warcraft rode the waves near Dew Pavilion. It was clear water between there and Guazhou, the ferry point on the opposite north shore.

Meanwhile, Song Jiang's army had reached Huai'an, the last stage before assembling in Yangzhou. Song was conferring with Wu Yong in his tent.

“We're not far from the Yangzi, now,” he said. “The enemy hold the southern shore. Who can I send as scouts to find a way of getting across?'

Four chieftains promptly volunteered. Who were they? Chai Jin the Small Whirlwind, Zhang Shun the White Streak in the Waves, Shi Xiu the Rash, and the Devil Incarnate Ruan the Seventh.

“Form two teams—Zhang Shun with Chai Jin, Ruan the Seventh with Shi Xiu,” Song Jiang directed. “Go to the islands of Jinshan Hill and Jiaoshan Hill. Find out the strength of the foe in Runzhou and report back to me in Yangzhou.”

The four took their leave of Song Jiang, divided into two teams, and proceeded first to Yangzhou, disguised as travellers. They met no one along the road. The local populace, hearing that an expeditionary army against Fang La was on its way, moved and hid themselves in outlying villages. The four split up after reaching Yangzhou. Each took along some dry rations. Shi Xiu and Ruan the Seventh set out for Jiaoshan Hill with two servants.

Chai Jin and Zhang Shun, armed with sharp daggers and halberds, also with two servants, all carrying dry rations, hurried to Guazhou. It was early spring. The sun was warm and the air fragrant with flowers when they arrived at the banks of the Yangzi. From a height, they observed the tumbling misty waves. A magnificent river scene!

On the other side they could see a long stretch of green and white flags at the foot of Beigu Mountain, and a line of many craft flanking the shore. On the north bank where the four stood there wasn't even a wooden spar.

“All the houses on the road to Guazhou were empty,” said Chai Jin, “and here at the river there are no boats. How can we learn what's happening over there?”

“Let's find a house to rest in,” Zhang Shun suggested. “I'll swim to Jinshan Island and see what I can find out.”

Chai Jin agreed, and the four walked along the shore until they came to a thatched shack. The door was locked from the inside. They couldn't push it open. Zhang Shun knocked a hole in the side wall and crawled in. A white-haired old woman rose from beside the stove. “Why didn't you open your door, old mother?”

“We've heard that the emperor is sending an army to fight Fang La, and we're right on the road to the river. A lot of people have moved away and gone into hiding. They've left me to take care of the house.”

“Where's your son?”

“He went to the village to look after his wife and children.”

“There are four of us, and we want to cross the river. Is there a boat around?”

“Where could anyone find a boat? Lu Shinang, when he heard the army is coming, took all the boats to Runzhou.”

“We have our own rations. If you let us live here a day or two, We'll give you some silver as rent. We won't disturb you.”

“You can stay. That's no problem. But I don't have any beds.”

“We'll manage.”

“I'm only afraid that big army will come here pretty soon.”

“We'll be able to hide.”

Zhang Shun opened the door and Chai Jin and the two servants entered. They rested their halberds, put down their luggage, brought out their dry rations and wheat-cakes, and ate.

Zhang Shun again went down to the river and looked. He saw Jinshan Monastery on an island precisely in the middle of the Yangzi. “Minister of Military Affairs Lu must go to that hill frequently,” he said to himself. “I'll slip over tonight and pick up some news.”

He returned and told Chai Jin what was on his mind. “There isn't even a small boat around here. How can we find out what's doing on the other side of the river?” he said. “Tonight I'm going to make a bundle of my clothes, wrap in two ingots of silver, put the whole thing on my head, and wade over to Jinshan Monastery. I'll bribe some monks, get the news, and come back and tell Big Brother. You wait here.”

“Go and return quickly,” said Chai Jin.

It was a starry evening, with a gentle breeze. The waves were calm, the water and the sky were the same color. Zhang Shun tied his clothes and two silver ingots in a bundle which he bound to his head, tied a sharp dagger at his waist, and entered the river at Guazhou. The water only came up to his chest. It was virtually like walking on dry land.

As he neared the foot of Jinshan Hill, he spotted a small craft moored beside the rocky slope. He crept over to it, removed the bundle from his head, stripped off his soaking garments, rubbed himself dry, changed into the clean clothes, and sat down in the boat. He could hear a watchman's drum in Runzhou striking the third watch.

Concealing himself, he looked around. A small vessel was sculling, downstream in his direction. “Those fellows are up to no good, zigzagging like that,” he mused.

He decided to shove off. It was then he discovered that his boat had only a mooring rope, but no oars or poles. Once again he removed his clothes. Pulling out his dagger, he waded towards the approaching craft.

The two men plying the sweep oar were watching the north shore, and didn't see Zhang Shun closing in from the south. He suddenly popped up at the side, grasped the gunwale and slashed with his dagger. The men dropped the oar and toppled into the river. Zhang Shun sprang onto the

craft. Two more men emerged from the cabin. Again Zhang Shun stabbed. One collapsed into water, the other, terrified, fell backwards into the cabin.

“Who are you? Whose boat is this?” Zhang Shun shouted. “Tell the truth and I'll spare you!”

“Hear me, good sir. I'm the steward of the Chen Guan family in Dingpu Village outside of Yangzhou City. I've just delivered a gift of grain to Minister Lu in Runzhou. He's accepted it and sent me back with one of his captains to demand fifty thousand bushels of white rice and three hundred boats. That will be my master's entrance fee into Lu's forces.”

“What's the captain's name? Where is he?”

“His name is Ye Gui. He's the man you just cut down.”

“What's your name? When did you bring the surrender offer to Lu? What's in this boat?”

“I'm called Wu Cheng, sir. We crossed over on the seventh of this month. On Minister Lu's instructions, I went to Suzhou to see the king's younger brother Fang Mao, the Third Great Prince, and drew three hundred unit banners and my master's official appointment document. He's been made prefect of Yangzhou and a Lord of Central Clarity. I have also a thousand uniforms and a letter from Minister Lu.”

“How many soldiers does your master command?”

“Several thousand infantry and a hundred or so cavalry. His two sons, Chen Yi and Chen Tai, are both formidable warriors.”

Having obtained the information he wanted, Zhang Shun with one stab of his dagger thrust Wu Cheng into the river. Then he took over the sweep oar and rowed back to Guazhou.

Chai Jin hurried out at the sound of the oar and saw Zhang Shun arriving in a boat. Zhang Shun related what had happened in detail. Chai Jin was very pleased. They took from the cabin the document and letter, three hundred

unit designation banners of red silk, and a thousand army uniforms of various color. They formed two large loads.

“I'll get my clothes,” said Zhang Shun. He rowed back to Jinshan Island, retrieved his clothing, his head kerchief, and the silver ingots. By the time he returned to the Guazhou banks it was almost dawn. A heavy mist blanketed the ground. At the shack they paid the old lady two or three ounces of silver, shouldered the loads, and went back to Yangzhou.

Song Jiang's forces were camped outside the city. The prefectural officials gave a banquet in his honor and invited him to move into the hostel for visiting dignitaries. They wined and dined him several days in a row, and fed his soldiers.

When the feasting was over, Chai Jin and Zhang Shun called on Song Jiang in the hostel. They said: “Chen Guan has tied in with Fang La. He's about to sneak rebel troops across to attack Yangzhou. Luckily, I intercepted Chen's steward in midriver. This is your chance, brother, for a brilliant stroke.”

Song Jiang was delighted. He called Wu Yong into conference and asked: “How shall we go about it? What would be our best plan?”

“Under the circumstances, taking Runzhou will be as easy as turning over your hand,” said the military advisor. “Once we nab Chen Guan, it will be a sure thing.” He spelled out his strategy.

“Excellent,” said Song Jiang. He directed Yan Qing the Prodigy to disguise himself as Captain Ye, and Xie Zhen and Xie Bao to dress as two southern soldiers. He gave them specific instructions. The three left the city for the village of Dingpu, the Xie brothers carrying the loads.

Forty *li* or more from Yangzhou, they neared Chen Guan's manor. Twenty or thirty vassals, in ordinary garb, were lined up neatly at the gate. Yan Qing hailed them, assuming a local accent.

“Is the master at home?”

“Where are you from, traveller?”

“Runzhou. Took a wrong turn after crossing the river. We wandered around for hours before reaching here.”

The vassals ushered the visitors into the guest-house and told them to rest their loads. Then they led Yan Qing to Chen Guan in the rear of the manse. Yan Qing bowed.

“Ye Gui presents his respects.”

“Where are you from, sir?”

“If you'll ask the others to withdraw, I'll venture to tell you.”

“These are all trusted associates. You can speak freely.”

“My name is Ye Gui. I am a captain under the command of Minister Lu. On the seventh day of the first month he received Wu Cheng with your secret message. He was very pleased. He directed me to escort Wu Cheng to Suzhou to convey Your Excellency's idea to the Third Great Prince, the king's younger brother. The prince petitioned His Majesty and obtained for you the position of prefect of Yangzhou. After you have met with the minister, he will determine ranks for your two sons. Wu Cheng has unfortunately been laid low by the flu. In order not to delay matters, the minister has dispatched me with your certificate of appointment, along with his letter, as well as your seal of office, tablet of authority, three hundred unit banners and a thousand uniforms. He would like Your Excellency's grain vessels to make delivery on the Runzhou river bank at the appointed time.”

Yan Qing handed over the official appointment certificate. Chen Guan read it joyfully. He hastily lit incense and, facing south, voiced thanks for this benevolence. He summoned his two sons, Chen Yi and Chen Tai, and presented them to the “captain.” Yan Qing instructed the Xie brothers to deliver the banners and uniforms to the rear manse. Chen Guan invited Yan Qing to be seated.

“I'm only a common soldier. How dare I sit in Your Excellency's presence?”

“You come as an emissary of His Majesty with documents of appointment for my humble self, sir. I would not be lacking in courtesy. Please be seated. It's quite proper.”

After repeatedly protesting, Yan Qing finally sat down at a distance. Chen Guan called for wine and preferred him a cup. Yan Qing politely refused.

“I never drink,” he said. He nevertheless downed two or three cups.

Then the two sons came forward to congratulate their father. With a significant glance, Yan Qing signalled to the Xie brothers. Xie Bao slipped a powerful drug into the wine pot when no one was looking. Yan Qing rose and spoke.

“I have brought no wine with me from across the river, but if I may use Your Excellency's brew, I would like to offer my congratulations.”

He poured a goblet to the full and urged Chen to drain it. He also gave a cup each to the two sons and the various close cronies. When all had drunk, Yan Qing pursed his mouth and gestured with his head. Xie Zhen left the building, found a firebrand, took out a small cannon and signal flag concealed on his person, went outside the manor, and fired the cannon. At the sound, chieftains, who had been waiting in concealment to the left and right, came running.

Yan Qing, in the manse, watched man after man collapse. He whipped out his short sword, and he and Xie Bao cut off all the heads. Ten gallant fellows poured in, yelling, through the manor gate. The vassals were unable to stem their rush. Yan Qing and the Xie brothers strode out carrying the heads of Chen Guan and his sons.

By then another six chieftains had arrived, leading a thousand troops. They ringed the manor, rounded up Chen Guan's family, and killed them all. Then, with the vassals in tow, they marched down to the cove. Riding at anchor were three or four hundred craft, laden to the brim with rice. The vessels were counted and a report rushed to Song Jiang.

He conferred with Wu Yong. Then they packed, took their leave of Governor Zhang, and marched with the army to Chen Guan's manor. They selected troops to board the craft, meanwhile dispatching a man to urge the naval vessels to hurry over.

“We'll send three hundred fast boats, first,” said Wu Yong, “each flying Fang La's banner. On deck, a thousand men will dress in the uniforms we got from him, and another three or four thousand will wear ordinary garb. An additional twenty thousand troops will be concealed in the cabins. Mu Hong will be disguised as Chen Yi, Li Jun as Chen Tai. They will each captain a large boat. Other chieftains will command the remaining craft.”

Mu Hong and Li Jun headed the first fleet. Each was supported by ten chieftains. Zhang Heng and Zhang Shun led the second fleet. They were backed by four chieftains each. Ten chieftains captained the third fleet. That made a total of forty-two chieftains commanding the three hundred vessels.

These were to be followed by Song Jiang and the others in boats carrying the horses, a thousand warcraft like swimming dragons and speeding leviathans, all flying Song Jiang's banner and containing the whole force of infantry and cavalry and commanders. The admirals of this armada would be Ruan the Second and Ruan the Fifth.

Meanwhile, on Beigu Mountain in Runzhou, a lookout observed the three hundred craft setting sail from the cove. Fluttering from their masts was the red banner designating the grain convoy. This was immediately reported to the harbor master. Minister Lu, accompanied by twelve commandants, all in full armor, their bows strung, their swords unsheathed, rode down to the river bank. With them was a unit of crack troops.

A hundred boats were nearing the shore. On the first two vessels were two men who appeared to be leaders. They were surrounded by soldiers in uniforms with a lock designation, stalwart fellows every one.

Minister Lu dismounted and sat down in a silver armchair. The twelve commandants formed two lines along the bank. Mu Hong and Li Jun hailed Lu respectfully. Captains to the left and right shouted for the boats to halt. The hundred craft, in a straight line, dropped anchor.

Sailing with a favorable wind from the north, the next two hundred also arrived. They divided into a hundred to the right and a hundred to the left, so that each of the three groups was equi-distant from the others.

The shipping commissioner approached the near craft.

“Where are you from?”

“My name is Chen Yi,” said Mu Hong, “and my brother is called Chen Tai. Our father, Chen Guan, has ordered us to deliver these fifty thousand bushels of white rice, three hundred vessels, and five thousand crack troops, in gratitude to Minister Lu for having petitioned the king on his behalf.”

“Minister Lu dispatched a Captain Ye the other day. Where is he?”

“Captain Ye and Wu Cheng both have typhoid fever. They're bedridden and couldn't come. But we've brought our father's seal of office and his appointment document.”

The shipping commissioner took them and walked up the bank to Minister Lu. “The sons of Chen Guan of Dingpu Village outside Yangzhou have brought grain and soldiers,” he said. “And here is the seal of office and appointment certificate you sent him.”

Lu examined them. It was indeed the original document. He ordered that the two sons be allowed ashore. The shipping commissioner shouted for Chen Yi and Chen Tai to be brought before the minister.

Mu Hong and Li Jun mounted the bank, followed by twenty chieftains. “The minister is here,” yelled the guards. “Persons with no business, stay away!” The twenty chieftains halted. Mu Hong and Li Jun, each with hands clasped and bodies inclined deferentially, also waited at a distance. After a lengthy pause, the shipping commissioner again conducted the two forward. They knelt before the minister.

“Why hasn't your father Chen Guan come in person?” Lu demanded.

“Our father has heard that Song Jiang of Liangshan Marsh is approaching with a large army,” replied Mu Hong. “He's afraid the bandits will disturb the countryside. He's staying at home to deal with them.”

“Which of you is the elder?”

“I, Chen Yi, am,” said Mu Hong.

“Have you two brothers learned the martial arts?”

“Basking in Your Excellency's propitious emanations, we have had some training.”

“This rice you're bringing, how is it stored?”

“Three hundred bushels per large vessel, one hundred bushels per small.”

“No doubt there's more to your mission than delivering grain!”

“Father and sons, we're completely loyal. We'd never venture to do anything untoward!”

“Your personal intentions may be all right, but there's something fishy about those troops on your craft. I can't help being suspicious. You two stay here. I'm going to send four commandants with a hundred soldiers to search your boats. It'll go hard with you if we find anything wrong!”

“We came hoping that you would make important use of our services. How can you doubt us!”

Before Lu could issue his order, a mounted scout trotted up and reported. “An order from the king has arrived at the South Gate. Your Excellency is requested to go at once to receive it.”

The minister hurriedly mounted. “Hold this bank. Don't let anyone ashore,” he instructed his officers. “Chen Yi and Chen Tai are to come with me.”

Mu Hong shot Li Jun a significant glance. Lu rode on ahead. Calling their escort of twenty, they followed him into the city. But the guards at the gate

barked a command.

“Minister Lu said that only these two are allowed in, no one else!”

Mu Hong and Li Jun were permitted to pass. The twenty chieftains had to wait. Minister Lu proceeded across the city to the South Gate, where he met the royal emissary.

“What's so urgent?” Lu asked.

The messenger was Fang La's royal usher, Feng Xi. He replied in an undertone: “Eunuch Pu Wenying the court astrologer has recently reported that, according to the night sky, many star spirits have entered this Wu area. He says half of them emit no light, a sure sign of serious trouble. The king has handed down this order, instructing you, Minister, to guard the bank well. Any persons coming from the north must be closely questioned. Kill them immediately if they arouse even a shadow of suspicion! They must not be allowed to remain!”

Lu was shocked. “A party of men has just come that I'm very doubtful about, and now this order. Please come into the city and read it to me.”

Feng Xi went with Lu to the provincial office, and there the emissary read the directive aloud. Just then, a messenger galloped up with a report.

“An order from the Third Great Prince in Suzhou. He says: 'Your news about the surrender of Chen Guan of Yangzhou is incredible. It's probably invented. At the same time there has been the announcement by the royal astrologer regarding the entry of star spirits into this Wu area. You must hold the river bank firmly. I am sending a man to supervise.”

“So the Great Prince is also concerned,” said the minister. “I've ready received a royal edict.”

He ordered his forces to closely guard the river front. No one was to be allowed to disembark. Lu then feasted the two emissaries.

Meanwhile, time was dragging for the men on the three hundred boats, and nothing was stirring. First Zhang Heng, Zhang Shun and the eight chieftains came ashore from the hundred craft on the left, carrying their arms; then another hundred, weapons in hand, from the hundred vessels on the right. The southern soldiers guarding the bank were unable to stop them.

Li Kui the Black Whirlwind and the Xie brothers headed for the city. Officers at the gate hurriedly blocked their path. With a hack and a chop, Li Kui promptly cut two of them down. Yells were heard as Xie Zhen and Xie Bao, each wielding a steel pitchfork, charged into Runzhou. With all this happening at the same time, it was impossible for the guards to close the gate.

As Li Kui bored into the passage, killing everyone he met, the twenty chieftains who had been denied entrance earlier now rushed in and seized the guards' weapons.

The twelve commandants had just received Minister Lu's order to hold the river front when the noise of the fighting at the city gate erupted. Hurriedly, they mustered their forces. But by then Shi Jin and Chai Jin had directed their troops on the decks of the three hundred craft to divest themselves of their southern uniforms and had led them ashore. They were followed by the soldiers who came swarming out of their concealment in the cabins.

Commandants Shen Gang and Pan Wende hastened with two columns to defend the city gate. Shen Gang was cut down from his horse by a single thrust from Shi Jin. Zhang Heng's spear ran Pan through the side. A wild melee followed, during which the remaining ten commandants fled into Runzhou to protect their families.

When Mu Hong and Li Jun heard the news, they took firebrands from a tavern and began setting blazes. Minister Lu sprang into the saddle. Three of the commandants had come to his support. By then the city was burning as if the sky had fallen.

Guazhou, seeing the conflagration, rushed a relief force. Battles raged at all four of the city gates, but on Runzhou's walls the banners of Song Jiang

were already flying. The slaughter and confusion on every side were beyond description.

Another hundred and fifty warcraft arrived from the north shore and unloaded two thousand cavalrymen and their mounts, led by ten chieftains in full armor. They charged into the city. Minister Lu was badly defeated. With his broken army he fled to Dantu County.

The expeditionary forces occupied Runzhou. They extinguished the fires and took command of the four gates. At the shore they welcomed Song Jiang's boat, and watched the other vessels, like swimming dragons and speeding leviathans, arriving on favorable winds at the south bank.

Chieftains of high rank and low led Song Jiang into the city. First, he posted notices reassuring the local populace. Then he mustered his military officers and assembled them at central headquarters, where they claimed their awards.

Shi Jin presented the head of Shen Gang, Zhang Heng the head of Pan Wente, Liu Tang the head of Shen Ze. Kong Ming and Kong Liang came forward with their captive Zhuo Wanli, Xiang Chong and Li Jun with their prisoner Ho Tong. Hao Siwen had killed Xu Tong with an arrow from his bow.

The attackers had taken Runzhou, killed four commandants, and captured two others. They had slaughtered southern aides, officers and soldiers without number.

Song Jiang's army had lost three chieftains, either killed by arrows or trampled to death by horses in the confusion of battle. They were Guardian of the Clouds Song Wan, Jiao Ting the Merciless, and Tao Zongwang the Nine-Tailed Tortoise. Song Jiang was very distressed.

“Life and death come to every man,” said Wu Yong. “Although we've lost three of our brothers, we've taken our first prefecture south of the Yangzi and removed a dangerous obstacle. Why upset yourself and injure your health? If we're to serve our country well, we'd better discuss national affairs.”

“The hundred and eight of us are inscribed on the stone tablet, we correspond to stars in the sky. First in Liangshan Marsh, and then on Mount Wutai, we vowed to live and die together. Who would have thought that after we returned to the capital Gongsun Sheng would leave us, the emperor would retain Jin Dajian and Huangfu Duan, Premier Cai would take Xiao Rang, and District Commander Wang would demand Yue Ho! And now, when we've just crossed the Yangzi, we've lost three more brothers! Song Wan wasn't very accomplished, but I remember what a great help he was when we first established ourselves on Mount Liangshan. And today he's gone to the Nether World!”

Song Jiang ordered the soldiers to set up a sacrificial altar on the spot where Song Wan died, and to lay out paper silver ingots, a black pig and a white sheep. He personally dedicated the sacrificial wine. Zhuo Wanli and Ho Tong, the commandants who had been taken prisoner, were decapitated, and the blood from their severed heads sprinkled to propitiate the spirits of the three departed heroes.

After revising the prefectural government and the local administrations, Song Jiang issued awards and wrote a report of his victory to Governor Zhang, inviting him to come and inspect. Corpses on the streets were collected, removed from the city, and burned. The bodies of the three slain chieftains were buried outside of Runzhou's East Gate.

Minister Lu had lost half his effectives. He retreated to the county town of Dantu with his six remaining commandants, and dared not venture out again. In a written dispatch to Suzhou, he begged the Third Great Prince to rescue him. Suzhou sent an army under General Xing Zheng. Lu welcomed him gratefully. In county headquarters, Lu told how, in the guise of Chen Guan's surrendering troops, Song Jiang's forces had been able to sneak across the Yangzi.

“But now that you are here, General,” Lu concluded, “we shall regain control of Runzhou City.”

Xing Zheng replied: “When the Third Great Prince was informed that certain stars were invading this region, he decided to dispatch me with an army to patrol the river front. We didn't expect that you would have already

been put at a disadvantage. But with your assistance, Minister, I will avenge you.”

The next day, Xing Zheng marched forth with his army to recapture Runzhou.

In Runzhou, meanwhile, after consulting with Wu Yong, Song Jiang sent Tong Wei and Tong Meng with a hundred or more men to Jiaoshan Hill to look for Shi Xiu and Ruan the Seventh. He also dispatched a contingent to take Dantu. Five thousand strong, it was commanded by ten chieftains.

On the way, they encountered Xing Zheng's army. An exchange of arrows caused both forces to halt out of each other's bow range and set up positions. Battle drums thundered, multi-colored embroidered banners fluttered in the breeze.

Xing Zheng rode forward with levelled lance, flanked on either side by the six commandants. From the Song army midst, Guan Sheng, brandishing his crescent halberd embossed with a dragon design, cantered out to meet the foe. The two contenders clashed in a murderous rage, their mounts stirring up clouds of dust. After fourteen or fifteen rounds, one of the men fell from his horse.

Truly, the boldness of heroes is no match for a general's clever plan. Relying on the capture of officers and men, they sought to retake the first prefecture south of the Yangzi.

Of the two contending warriors, who killed whom? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 92
Lu Junyi Marches on Xuanzhou Prefecture
Song Jiang Battles at Piling Shire

After only fourteen or fifteen rounds, Guan Sheng swung his halberd and cut Xing Zheng from his saddle. Poor southern hero, his life vanished like a dream! At this, Huyan Zhuo urged his men into the fray. The six

commandants fled southwards. Minister Lu abandoned Dantu and led his broken contingents in the direction of Changzhou County.

The ten chieftains occupied Dantu and notified Song Jiang of their victory. He moved a large force into the county and there made camp. After rewarding the troops, he rushed a dispatch to Military Governor Zhang reporting that he now was in control of Runzhou. The following day, staff officers Zong and Geng arrived in Dantu with rewards from the governor. Song Jiang distributed them among his commanders.

Conferring with Lu Junyi, Song Jiang said: “Xuanzhou and Huzhou prefectures are also being held by Fang La's brigands. Let's divide the army into two columns, and each of us lead one. We can draw lots to determine who goes where.”

Song Jiang drew Changzhou and Suzhou, Lu drew Xuanzhou and Huzhou. Song directed Ironclad Virtue Pei Xuan to divide the officers and men. With the exception of Yang Zhi who was ill and remained in Dantu, the others were assigned to the different columns.

In Song Jiang's contingent there were thirteen senior commanders, who, apart from Song Jiang himself, were Wu Yong the Wizard, who served as the chief of staff; Li Ying the Heaven-Soaring Eagle; Guan Sheng the Big Halberd; Hua Rong the Lesser Li Guang; Qin Ming the Thunderbolt; Xu Ning the Metal Lancer; Zhu Tong the Beautiful Beard; Sagacious Lu the Tattooed Monk; Wu Song the Pilgrim; Shi Jin the Nine Dragons; Li Kui the Black Whirlwind; and Dai Zong the Marvelous Traveler. And there were twenty-nine lieutenant commanders, who are: Huang Xin the Suppressor of Three Mountains; Sun Li the Sickly General; Hao Siwen the Wild Dog; Xuan Zan the Ugly Son in Law; Han Tao the Ever-Victorious General; Peng Qi the Eyes of Heaven General; Fan Rui the Demon King Who Roils the World; Ma Lin the Elfin Flutist; Yan Shun the Elegant Tiger; Xiang Chong the Eight-Armed Nezha; Li Gun the Flying Divinity; Bao Xu the God of Death; Wang Ying the Stumpy Tiger; Hu Sanniang the Ten Feet of Steel; Yang Lin the Elegant Panther; Shi En the Golden-Eyed Tiger Cub; Du Xing the Demon Face; Kong Ming the Comet; Kong Liang the Flaming Star; Ling Zhen the Heaven-Shaking Thunder; Cai Fu the Iron Arm; Cai Qing the Single Blossom; Duan Jingzhu the Golden Dog; Hou Jian the Long-

Armed Ape; Jiang Jing the Magic Calculator; An Daoquan the Skilled Doctor; Yu Baosi the Spirit of the Dangerous Road; Song Qing the Iron Fan and Pei Xuan the Ironclad Virtue.

These senior and lieutenant commanders led a force of thirty thousand crack troops.

In Lu Junyi's contingent there were fourteen senior commanders, who, in addition to Lu Junyi himself, were: Zhu Wu the Miraculous Strategist; Chai Jin the Small Whirlwind; Lin Chong the Panther Head, Dong Ping the General Two Spears; Huyan Zhuo the Two Rods; Suo Chao the Urgent Vanguard; Mu Hong the Unrestrained; Yang Xiong the Pallid; Lei Heng the Winged Tiger; Xie Zhen the Two-Headed Snake; Xie Bao the Twin-Tailed Scorpion; Zhang Qin the Featherless Arrow; Liu Tang the Red-Haired Demon and Yan Qing the Prodigy.

The thirty-three lieutenant commanders were: Shan Tinggui the Water General; Wei Dingguo the Fire General; Lu Fang the Little Duke; Guo Sheng the Second Rengui; Ou Peng the Golden Wings Brushing the Clouds; Deng Fei the Fiery-Eyed Lion; Li Zhong the Tiger-Fighting General; Zhou Tong the Little King; Chen Da the Gorge-Leaping Tiger; Yang Chun the White-Spotted Snake; Xue Yong the Sick Tiger; Du Qian the Skyscraper; Mu Chun the Slightly Restrained; Zou Yuan the Dragon from the Forest; Zou Run the One-Horned Dragon; LiLi the Hell's Summoner; Li Yun the Black-Eyed Tiger; Shi Yong the Stone General; Zhu Gui the Dry-Land Crocodile; Zhu Fu the Smiling Tiger; Sun Xin the Junior General; Mistress Gu the Tigress; Zhang Qing the Vegetable Gardener; Sun Erniang the Witch; Zheng Tianshou the Fair-Faced Gentleman; Tang Long the Gold-Coin Spotted Leopard; Cao Zheng the Demon Carver; Bai Sheng the Daylight Rat; Gong Wang the Flowery-Necked Tiger; Ding Desun the Arrow-Struck Tiger; Wang Dingliu the Lightning and Shi Qian the Flea on the Drum.

This column also contained thirty thousand crack troops. Still another group of chieftains captained the naval units.

Tong Wei and Tong Meng, who had been sent to Jiaoshan Hill to look for Shi Xiu and Ruan the Seventh, returned and said: “They killed a whole

family at the river bank, seized a light craft and went over to the monastery on the island. When the abbot heard that they were bold fellows from Liangshan Marsh, he invited them to a vegetarian meal. Later, after learning what Zhang Shun had accomplished, they got a boat at the foot of the hill and captured Maogang. That's a good place for an assault on Jiangyin and Taicang on the sea coast. They've sent a written request for naval chieftains and warcraft."

Song Jiang directed Li Jun and seven other chieftains to join Shi Xiu and Ruan the Seventh with a fleet of a hundred vessels and five thousand men. Reader, please note, when Song Jiang divided his army into two columns at Dantu he had less than a hundred chieftains— ninety-nine, to be exact, including himself. The large boats sailed with the naval chieftains to assault the seaports of Jiangyin and Taicang, the smaller entered the streams around Dantu and went with Song Jiang for the attack on Changzhou.

Meanwhile, Lu Shinang, Fang La's minister of military affairs, withdrew to Piling Shire—major defense sector of Changzhou. The governor of Changzhou was Qian Zhenpeng, and under him were two generals. One was Jin Jie, from Shanghao in Miug County. The other was Qian's trusted associate Xu Ding. Qian originally had been a constable in Qingxi County. But he had helped Fang La capture several cities and had been given charge of governing Changzhou.

When Qian heard that Lu had retreated to Changzhou after having been defeated and losing Runzhou, he went with Jin Jie and Xu Ding, opened the gates, and invited him into the city. He entertained Lu courteously and discussed future measures.

"Set your mind at ease, Minister," said Qian. "I am a man of no talents but, thanks to the emanations of His Majesty's good fortune and Your Excellency's prestige, I shall gladly give my all to drive Song Jiang and his gang back across the Yangzi and recover Runzhou. Those rogues will never dare to so much as look south of the river again!"

Reassured, Lit said: “With you exerting such efforts, Governor, our country has no reason to be alarmed. After you have expelled the foe and restored Runzhou to us, I shall earnestly urge the king to bestow on you the highest honors.”

That day Lu gave a feast. Of that we need say no more. In his expedition against Changzhou and Suzhou, Song Jiang now neared Piling Shire with a large force. Under him were eleven commanders headed by Guan Sheng, and three thousand troops. At the outskirts of Changzhou they waved their banners and thundered a challenge on their drums.

“Who dares to drive back the enemy?” queried Lu.

“Permit me to offer my services,” said Qian, from the saddle of his charger.

The minister assigned six commandants to assist him. They mustered five thousand men, opened the city gate, lowered the drawbridge, and marched forth. Qian, gale-stirring sword in hand, astride a curly-maned swift roan, rode in the van.

Guan Sheng pulled his men back a short distance and allowed Qian Zhenpeng to deploy in battle position. The six commandants flanked Qian on either side. Guan Sheng reined in his steed and brandished his sword.

“Hear me, bandits,” he shouted. “You're aiding a rebel who destroys life and angers the Heavenly Spirits. Our imperial army has arrived, but instead of realizing your deadly danger, you dare to resist! We'll not leave until we've slaughtered every last one of you knaves!”

Qian was furious. “You're just a bunch of scruffy robbers from Liangshan Marsh who don't know the will of Heaven! Instead of supporting a rightful king, you surrender to an immoral moron of a sovereign and come to vie against our great kingdom! We're going to pulverise you till there's nothing left of you or your armor!”

Guan Sheng, raging, charged waving his dragon-engraved halberd. Qian met him, wielding his gale-raising sword. Evenly matched, they clashed in a battle worthy of record in book or painting. Blades flashed icily in an

atmosphere heavily lethal. The horses pranced and neighed as the contestants struck and parried. Like a streaking meteor was the gale-stirring sword, like lightning across the plain was the dragon-engraved halberd. Hoofs churned the dust, bridle bells jingled into the clouds. Weapons darted, the murderous intensity terrified the celestial spirits.

More than thirty rounds the warriors fought and Qian gradually was forced on the defensive. Two commandants on the southern side, seeing him weaken, galloped out with levelled lances and attacked Guan Sheng in a pincers. They were Zhao Yi and Fan Chou. This angered two chieftains in the Song army. One brandished a lethal sword, the other clutched a tiger-eyed cudgel, as they raced out on their horses. They were Huang Xin the Suppressor of the Three Mountains and Sun Li the Sickly General. Six warriors, three pairs, fought desperately on the field of combat.

Minister Lu hastily sent generals Xu Ding and Jin Jie from the city to join the fray. Weapons in hand, they rode forth.

Zhao Yi versus Huang Xin, Fan Chou versus Sun Li—they were at first evenly matched. But as the battle intensified, southern commandants Zhao and Fan began gaining the advantage. And now Xu Ding and Jin Jie, each wielding a big halberd, were also in the field. The Song army sent Han Tao and Peng Qi to engage them. It was Jin Jie against Han Tao, Xu Ding against Peng Qi. The five pairs battled in deadly earnest.

Actually, General Jin Jie had secretly made up his mind to surrender to the Song forces. In order to create confusion in his own ranks, he retreated to them after desultorily fighting only a few rounds. Han Tao pursued him. At this, southern commandant Gao Keli quickly fitted an arrow to his bow, pulled it to the full, and let fly. The feathered missile struck Han Tao in the cheek, knocking him from his steed.

Qin Ming hastily clapped his horse and raced to the rescue, flourishing his wolf-toothed cudgel. But southern commandant Zhang Jinren, with one thrust of his lance, pierced Han Tao's throat and killed him. Peng Qi and Han Tao had been first and second in command of the same unit, and close as brothers. Burning to avenge Han, Peng broke off from Xu Ding and rode directly towards Gao. Xu Ding galloped after him, but was intercepted by

Qin Ming. Gao levelled his lance and prepared to meet his assailant. But Peng Qi was taken unawares by a thrust of Zhang's lance from the side and tumbled from his saddle.

Infuriated by the loss of two chieftains, Guan Sheng couldn't wait to charge into Changzhou. Concentrating his remarkable strength, he sliced Governor Qian to the ground. He was about to capture the governor's curly-maned roan when his own mount stumbled and tossed him off. Gao and Zhang galloped forward to seize Guan Sheng, but Xu Ning, Xuan Zan and Hao Siwen raced ahead and snatched their fallen brother back to the Song position.

Minister Lu's entire army then came pouring out of the city. Guan Sheng and the chieftains had lost the initiative. They retreated north. The southern contingent pursued them for more than twenty *li* before giving up the chase.

Guan Sheng returned with his beaten forces to Song Jiang and told him of the death of Han Tao and Peng Qi. Song Jiang wept bitterly.

“Who would have thought that after crossing the Yangzi I would lose five brothers? Can I have angered Heaven? Am I not to be allowed to capture Fang La? Am I destined for defeat?”

“You're wrong, Commander-in-Chief,” said Wu Yong. “Victory and defeat are common in warfare, and man's birth and death are predestined. They're nothing to wonder about. Today, our two chieftains were fated to die, and that's all there is to it. Please don't upset yourself. Concentrate on our important affairs.”

Li Kui came to the tent and said: “Let a few fellows who recognize my brothers' murderers point them out and I'll kill the rogues and avenge them!”

Song Jiang ordered his units to fly white mourning banners on the morrow, and said: “I'll lead you all to the city personally! We'll have a showdown with those bandits!”

The next day Song Jiang and his entire army, on water and on land, in boats and on horse, left camp and set forth. Li Kui the Black Whirlwind, leading chieftains Bao Xu, Xiang Chong, Li Gun and five hundred tough brave infantry, moved up as a vanguard to the walls of Changzhou.

Minister Lu, depressed by the loss of Governor Qian, had dispatched three urgent messages in a row to the Third Great Prince in Suzhou, begging for assistance. He also had sent a plea to the throne. Now, he received a report.

“Five hundred infantry are advancing on the city. Their banner says they are led by Li Kui the Black Whirlwind.”

“That lout is the fiercest man in Liangshan Marsh. He's a born killer. Who will take him on?”

Gao Keli and Zhang Jinren, two distinguished commandants, stepped forward.

“If you capture the rascal,” said Lu, “I will see to it that the king raises you in rank and rewards you handsomely.”

The two took their lances, mounted, and marched from the city with a thousand infantry and cavalry. Li Kui stretched his troops before them in a line. He stood in front, grasping his two battle-axes. By his side was Bao Xu, a broad cutlass in hand. Xiang Chong and Li Gun, nearby, held barbed shields. In their right hands they gripped steel javelins. Chests and backs protected by armor plate, the four chieftains stood in a line at the front.

Southern commandants Gao and Zhang, wildcats who were stronger than tigers, ravens who could bully eagles, deployed their thousand soldiers near the city walls.

A few of Song Jiang's scouts recognized Gao and Zhang as the killers Of Han Tao and Peng Qi. They pointed them out to Black Whirlwind. Dispensing with any challenges, Li Kui charged across the field with his axes. Bao Xu hastily called Xiang Chong and Li Gun, who were waving their barbed shields, and all four swept into the enemy position.

The astonished Gao and Zhang were completely unprepared. They turned their horses to flee, but the barbed shields were already twirling under the animals' muzzles. Gao and Zhang lunged with their lances, but the shields warded off the thrusts. Black Whirlwind hacked the legs of Gao's mount and brought the rider tumbling to the ground.

“Take him alive,” cried Xiang Chong. But Li Kui was a killer. He couldn't be stopped. He decapitated Gao with a single blow of his ax. Bao Xu pulled Zhang from the saddle and cut off his head as well.

The four then ripped into the southern troops. Li Kui tied Gao's head to his belt and, with both hands free, swung his axes left and right. A thousand enemy infantry and cavalry ran pell-mell back into the city, but not before Black Whirlwind had mowed down three or four hundred of them.

At the drawbridge Li Kui and Bao Xu wanted to fight their way into Changzhou. They were restrained only by the strenuous efforts of Xiang Chong and Li Gun. Cannon balls pelted down on them from the city walls, and the four withdrew. They found their five hundred men still standing in a line exactly where they had left them. The soldiers had wanted to join in the fighting, but no one dared to get near Li Kui when his blood lust was aroused and he was slaughtering indiscriminately.

By then Song Jiang had come riding up. Li Kui and Bao Xu presented the heads. The other chieftains were amazed.

“How did you do it?” they asked.

“We destroyed many of the foe and intended to take these two alive. But our hands itched. We couldn't control ourselves. So we killed them.”

Song Jiang said: “Since we have the heads of the murderers of Han Tao and Peng Qi, we can look up at the sky from under the white mourning banners and offer them as sacrifices.”

Again he wept bitterly. Then he had the white banners taken down, rewarded the four raiders and marched with his troops to the walls of Changzhou.

Inside the city, Minister Lu was highly alarmed. He conferred with Jin lie, Xu Ding and the four commandants on how to drive Song Jiang back. They all had seen Li Kui's one-man massacre, and their hearts were chilled. No one would venture out. Again Lu called for volunteers but, like geese whose beaks had been pinned shut by arrows, like fish hooked through the gills, they couldn't utter a sound. Not a man dared to respond.

Sunk in gloom, Lu sent observers up on the walls. Song Jiang's army had surrounded the city. They were pounding drums, waving banners, yelling challenges. Lu ordered all his generals to man the ramparts. They left his headquarters. Alone, he pondered fruitlessly. Finally, he summoned his closest confidants. Their only wish by then was to escape. Of that we'll say no more.

Meanwhile Jin Jie returned home and said to his wife Jade Orchid: “Song Jiang has ringed the city and is pressing from three sides. Changzhou is short of grain. It can't hold out for very long. Once they break in, their blades will turn us all into ghosts!”

“You're loyal to the emperor and want to surrender. When you were a Song official the imperial court treated you well. Since you're willing to abandon evil and return to righteousness, why not capture Minister Lu and turn him over to Song Jiang? That will ensure your welcome.”

“Lu has four commandants under him, each with his own troops. That oaf Xu Ding and I have never got along, and he's one of Lu's most trusted associates. A single strand can't spin a thread, a single hand can't clap alone. I'm afraid I couldn't bring it off. It would only end in disaster.”

“Write a secret message, bind it to an arrow, and shoot it out of the city tonight. Let Song Jiang know what you're planning. By coordinating from within and without, he'll be able to take Changzhou. Go forth tomorrow and pretend to be defeated. Let the Song forces follow as you retreat into the city. It will be a splendid deed.”

“Very clever, my dear wife. I'll do as you say.”

The next day Song Jiang stepped up his assaults on the city and Minister Lu called his generals into conference. Jin Jie spoke.

“Changzhou is on high terrain. It's easy to defend but not a good place from which to attack. We should hang on until relief comes from Suzhou. Then we can all go into battle together.”

Lu agreed. “Well said.” He instructed Ying Ming and Zhao Yi to hold the East Gate, Shen Bian and Fan Chou the North Gate, Jin Jie the West Gate, and Xu Ding the South Gate. The generals and their soldiers took up their respective posts.

That evening Jin Jie wrote a secret letter and attached it to an arrow. In the still of the night he sped it from atop the wall towards an enemy patrol outside the West Gate. The officer in charge hurriedly delivered it to Sagacious Lu the Tattooed Monk and Wu Song the Pilgrim, who commanded the western camp. They had Du Xing rush it to the main camp to the northeast, where Song Jiang and Wu Yong were conferring by candlelight in the headquarters tent. Song Jiang read the letter with joy. He had its contents immediately transmitted to all three camps.

The following day they launched an offensive from three sides. Minister Lu, in the command tower on the wall, heard an earth-shaking explosion in Song Jiang's position, and a fiery cannon ball flew over and struck a corner of the tower. Half of it collapsed with a crash. In mortal fear, Lu hurried down from the wall. He exhorted the generals guarding the four gates to go out and repel the foe.

Three rolls on the battle drums, and the city gates were opened wide and the drawbridges lowered. From the North Gate Shen Bian and Fan Chou marched forth with their men. Guan Sheng the Big Halberd rode out to meet them on Governor Qian's curly-maned roan.

He was just about to engage Fan Chou in combat when Jin Jie and his troops emerged and challenged the enemy to fight. Sun Li cantered forward and took on Jin Jie. Before they had fought three rounds, Jin Jie, feigning defeat, turned and galloped away. Sun Li pursued, closely followed by nine

more chieftains. Jin Jie retreated into the city, and the chieftains pushed in after him, capturing the West Gate.

The news that Song Jiang's army was pouring in through the West Gate put Changzhou in a turmoil. Fang La had cruelly oppressed the people, and their hatred knew no bounds. They rushed out in full force to help the Song attackers. Song Jiang's banner was already flying on the city ramparts.

Fan Chou and Shen Bian, seeing that the tide had turned, hastily started back to Changzhou to protect their families. But Wang the Stumpy Tiger and woman warrior Ten Feet of Steel cut in from the left and grabbed Fan Chou. Xuan Zan and Hao Siwen dashed up on the right and knocked Shen Bian from his saddle with their lances. The Song soldiers captured him.

Now the entire army under Song Jiang and Wu Yong surged into the city, seeking out southern troops and killing them in great number. Minister Lu and Xu Ding fled desperately through the South Gate. Pursuing Song troops were unable to catch them, and returned to Changzhou. While awaiting further orders, they discussed the awards they would claim.

Zhao Yi, who had been hiding in the home of one of the local populace, was seized by his host and handed over. Ying Ming had been killed in battle. His head was presented as proof.

Song Jiang, on entering Changzhou, posted notices reassuring the masses. They crowded to the prefectural center, supporting the old and carrying the infants, to express their thanks. Song Jiang comforted them, and promised they would be considered as good, law-abiding citizens. The chieftains also came to claim their awards.

When Jin Jie arrived to pay his respects, Song Jiang descended the steps to greet him personally and invite him into the hall. Kowtowing at the foot of the steps, Jin Jie voiced his gratitude. He said his wife deserved the credit for his return to the Song regime as a loyal official.

Song Jiang directed that Fan Chou, Shen Bian and Zhao Yi be locked in cage-carts and escorted by Jin Jie to Governor Zhang in Runzhou. He wrote a covering document which he gave to Jin Jie. At the same time he

instructed Dai Zong the Marvellous Traveller to fly on ahead with a letter vouching for Jin Jie and urging that he be accepted into the main Song army. Song Jiang praised his loyalty so highly that Zhang received him when he arrived at Runzhou. The Governor was very favorably impressed. He presented Jin Jie with gold and silver and silks, a fine horse and ceremonial wine.

Deputy District Commander Liu Guangshi appointed him an expeditionary commander. Later, when they broke the Golden Tartars under Fourth Prince Wushu, Jin Jie distinguished himself many times in battle. He eventually was given his own command, and died while fighting at Zhongshan.

But to get back to that day in Runzhou, Zhang and Liu, after rewarding Jin Jie, had the three rebel commanders killed, their bodies pulverised and their heads hung up on public display. They also sent lavish rewards to Song Jiang and his forces.

After settling his army at Changzhou, Song Jiang dispatched Dai Zong to learn the results of Lu Junyi's campaign against Xuanzhou and Huzhou. Meanwhile, a mounted scout arrived with a report.

“Minister Lu is in Wuxi. He's joined forces with a rescue army from Suzhou, and they're heading this way.”

Song Jiang selected ten infantry and cavalry chieftains and ordered them south with ten thousand men to meet the foe. Guan Sheng and other chieftains commanding the advance contingent bid Song Jiang farewell and left the city.

Dai Zong returned with Chai Jin and told Song Jiang: “General Lu Junyi has captured Xuanzhou. He's sent Chai Jin to tell you about it.”

Song Jiang was delighted. He greeted Chai Jin with wine and conducted him to the rear hall. Chai Jin handed him a detailed written report which read:

“Fang La's garrison general of Xuanzhou, Jia Yuqing, had under him six commandants, all natives of Shezhou and Muzhou. Jia sent them forth with three columns. Our chieftains killed four in personal combat, and their columns retreated into Xuanzhou. Lu Junyi ordered an all-out assault. When we neared the city gates, enemy soldiers on the walls threw down a grind stone, killing one of our chieftains. Their arrows flew like rain. All were poison-tipped. Two more of our chieftains were hit. Both died when we got them back to camp.

“General Lu, angered, pushed the attack through the night. The East Gate was not very well defended, and so we took Xuanzhou. We killed their fifth commandant during the assault. Garrison General Jia fled with his remnant troops towards Huzhou. We don't know where Cheng Shengzu, the sixth commandant, has gone. The grindstone killed Zheng Tianshou the Fair-Faced Gentleman. Slain by poison arrows were Cao Zheng the Demon Carver and Lightning Wang Dingliu.”

On hearing that he had lost three more brothers, Song Jiang wept wildly and collapsed in a faint. His skin was yellow, his lips purple, his finger-nails blue, his eyes lustreless. There was no telling about the state of his five organs, but his four limbs were paralyzed.

Truly, flowers open, only to be blown down by the wind. Can the moonlight withstand dark gathering clouds?

Could Song Jiang recover after falling unconscious? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 93
Turbulent River Dragon Pledges Brotherhood on Taihu Lake
Song Jiang Convenes a Large Meeting in Suzhou City

It was some time before the chieftains were able to revive Song Jiang. When at last he could speak, he said to Wu Yong: “We'll never take Fang La. We've been very unlucky since crossing the river. We've lost eight brothers, one after another!”

“Talking like that will only discourage our forces,” said the military advisor. “We returned to the capital intact after defeating the Liao because that was Heaven's will. Some of our brothers' time was up, and we lost them. But we've captured three big prefectures— Runzhou, Changzhou and Xuanzhou, thanks to the emperor's fortunate emanations and your own splendid prestige. What's unlucky about that? You've no reason to be discouraged.”

“You're right, of course. I guess I was counting too heavily on the hundred and eight of us being star spirits and our names appearing on the stone tablet. We've all been as close as arms and legs to a single body. I couldn't help feeling grieved by the bad news today.”

“Please don't upset yourself. You must preserve your health. Concentrate on the disposition of troops and the Wuxi offensive.”

“I'll keep Lord Chai Jin with me. Have Dai Zong notify Lu Junyi to attack Huzhou and meet us in Hangzhou as soon as possible.”

Wu Yong had Pei Xuan write the dispatch and sent Dai Zong off with it to Xuanzhou. Of that we'll say no more.

Meanwhile, Minister Lu and Xu Ding, fleeing to Wuxi, met the relief army sent by the Third Great Prince from Suzhou. It was headed by General Wei Zhong, and under him were a dozen or more commanders and ten thousand men. The two contingents joined forces and prepared to defend Wuxi. Lu told how Jin Jie had virtually made a gift of Changzhou to the enemy.

“Don't worry, Minister,” said Wei Zhong. “We'll get it back for you.”

A cavalry scout reported! “Song Jiang's army is nearly here. Better get ready.” Wei Zhong mounted his steed and led his troops out of the North Gate to confront the foe. But when he saw how strong Song Jiang's army was, with Li Kui the Black Whirlwind, followed by Bao Xu, Xiang Chong and Li Jun, charging directly towards him, he knew his army couldn't withstand them, and pulled back in disorder, completely routed. As he hastily retreated into the city, the four chieftains were right behind him. Lu fled through the South Gate. Guan Sheng and his troops by then had

captured Wuxi, and the city was in flames. Wei Zhong and Xu Ding also escaped through the South Gate, returning to Suzhou.

Guan Sheng rushed a report of the victory to Song Jiang, who soon arrived with the other chieftains. Notices were posted reassuring the local populace that they would be treated as good citizens. The army made camp in the county, and a request was sent to Governor Zhang and Deputy District Commander Liu that they retain control over Changzhou.

Minister Lu, with Wei Zhong and Xu Ding, leading their defeated forces, hurried to Suzhou city and begged succor from the Third Great Prince. They said they had been unable to hold Wuxi because Song Jiang's army was of overwhelming strength. Infuriated, Fang Mao ordered his guards to execute Minister Lu at once.

“Song Jiang's commanders are experienced warriors, men of remarkable Courage,” said Wei Zhong, “and their soldiers are all Liangshan Marsh bandits with plenty of battle experience. They're hard to beat.”

“I'll withhold the sword from your neck for the time being,” Fang Mao said to the minister. “You can have five thousand more troops. Go out first and patrol. I'll also assign some more generals. We'll make farther plans later.”

Lu bowed and thanked him. Dressing in full armor, he took his snake lance, eighteen feet long, mounted and led his soldiers from the city.

Fang Mao summoned eight more generals, each tall and strong and highly skilled with weapons. A sickle-bladed lance in hand, he rode out with them personally to observe the combat. Preceded by the eight generals, and followed by thirty-two commanders in neat ranks, he led fifty thousand soldiers through the city's Changho Gate. Minister Lu, with Wei Zhong and Xu Ding, who had left earlier, by then had passed the Cool Hill Monastery and were advancing towards Wuxi.

Already informed by his scouts, Song Jiang had marched more than ten *li* from Wuxi County with a large contingent under several generals. The two armies sighted each other and deployed into battle positions. Minister Lu

angrily cantered forward, lance in hand, and challenged Song Jiang to do combat.

Song Jiang was standing beneath an arch of pennants. He turned his head and called: “Who will capture this knave for me?” Before the words were out of his mouth, Xu Ning the Metal Lancer galloped out with his golden lance and engaged Minister Lu. To the encouraging shouts from their respective sides, they fought more than twenty rounds. Then Lu tried a feint, and Xu ran him through the ribs. The minister fell dead to the ground. Both armies yelled. Li Kui the Black Whirlwind brandishing his axes, and Bao Xu the God of Death flourishing his sword, plus Xiang Chong and Li Gun each twirling his barbed shield, tore across the field. The southern soldiers were thrown into confusion. Poised for a charge, Song Jiang's forces found themselves confronted by Fang Mao's main army. They halted each other's advance with swarms of arrows, and both contingents took up battle positions. The eight southern generals spread out in a straight line. Fang Mao was enraged to learn that Minister Lu had been killed. He rode forth, lance athwart his saddle, and reviled Song Jiang.

“You're only a gang of petty robbers from Liangshan Marsh! The doomed Song court has named you a Vanguard General and sends you to invade our land of Wu! I'll not withdraw my soldiers till we've slaughtered you, every one!”

Song Jiang, also on horseback, retorted: “You're just a bunch of rustics from Muzhou! What chance have you of ever winning sovereignty! Surrender and save your necks. We are the imperial army. How dare you resist us with tricky words? We're not leaving till we've killed you all!”

“Enough of this chatter. I have here eight fierce generals. Dare you select eight to do them battle?”

Song Jiang laughed. “We'd be no true gallants if we pitted two against one. We'll match you eight for eight. But no man knocked from his horse is to be killed. He must be carried back to his own side. There must be no sniping with arrows and no seizure of corpses. If there is no clear victor, no general melee shall be allowed, and the contest must be continued the following day.”

Fang Mao agreed. At his order, his eight generals rode forward, weapons in hand. Song Jiang spoke to his own officers. “Let eight cavalry commanders enter the field.” Through the arch of pennants, from the left and from the right, eight chieftains moved forward on their steeds in formation. Drums thundered, banners fluttered, each side fired a signal cannon, and shouts rose from the two armies as the sixteen mounted figures lined up against their opposites.

For more than thirty rounds they fought, until a man was downed. And who was the victor? Zhu Tong the Beautiful Beard. His lance had stabbed his opponent from his saddle. Trumpets in both armies sounded the withdrawal. The remaining seven pairs disengaged and returned to their original positions.

Fang Mao the Third Great Prince, due to the loss of his general, felt at a disadvantage. He pulled his forces back into the city of Suzhou. Song Jiang praised his cavalry chieftains and made camp near the Icy Hill Monastery. He raised Zhu Tong in rank. Pei Xuan wrote a report of the matter to Military Governor Zhang. Of that we'll say no more.

The Third Great Prince held the city but wouldn't come out and fight. He posted his generals at the gates, laid a field of barbed branches in depth, lined the walls with bowmen and cannon, prepared to heat molten metal, and piled bottles of lime along the ramparts. He would defend Suzhou stubbornly.

Song went to view the situation with four chieftains and thirty some-odd cavalry. The city was surrounded by water and the walls were strong. “We won't take this place in a hurry,” he thought. He returned to camp and conferred with Wu Yong.

Li Jun the naval chieftain was announced. He had just arrived from Jiangyin. Song Jiang directed that he be invited into the headquarters tent. He entered and Song Jiang asked him about the situation along the coast.

“We sailed against Jiangyin and Taicang and they battled us with naval craft,” said Li Jun. “Ruan the Second finished one of their commanders with a thrust of his spear, another was killed by our arrows, and we captured

both towns. Then Shi Xiu, Zhang Heng and Zhang Shun took Jiading, and the three Ruan brothers occupied Changshu. I've come specially to report."

Delighted, Song Jiang rewarded Li Jun. He sent him on with a dispatch concerning the victories to Governor Zhang and Deputy District Commander Liu in Changzhou. There, the two officials further rewarded Li Jun and instructed him to return to the camp at Icy Hill Monastery.

Realizing that only a naval offensive could crack the watergirt Suzhou, Song Jiang kept Li Jun with him, and directed that he prepare vessels for the assault.

"Better let me go and have a look, so that I'll know what I'm doing."

"Right."

Li Jun was gone two days. When he returned he said: "The southern side of the city is near Taihu Lake. I'll need a boat that will take me into the lake from the Yixing tributary. From there, I'll cross over to Wujiang and see what news I can pick up about the southern end. Then we'll be able to attack from four sides and break in."

"An excellent idea. Just what I've been thinking. But I must get some good assistants to go with you."

Song Jiang appointed four chieftains to aid in capturing more coastal towns and directed the recall of Tong Wei and Tong Meng. Li Jun took the order and the replacements to Jiangyin and returned with Tong Wei and Tong Meng two days later. Song Jiang greeted them, and instructed them to go with Li Jun and spy out the southern end of Suzhou.

The three set sail in a little craft. Two boatmen plied the sweep oars. They followed Tixing Creek around to Taihu Lake, a broad body of water of beautiful emerald green. Crossing the lake, they neared Wujiang and saw in the distance forty or fifty fishing boats.

"We'll pretend we're fish buyers," said Li Jun, "and ask some questions."

They rowed over to the first vessel and Li Jun queried: “Got any carp?”

“If it's carp you want, come home with me and I'll sell you some.”

Li Jun's boat accompanied a few of the fishing craft. Before long they sighted a hamlet of twenty or so households in a grove of bent-backed weeping willows. There the fishermen moored their boats and led Li and his party to a compound on the bank.

The moment he set foot inside the compound gate, the first fisherman whistled. Seven or eight big fellows with hooked poles immediately closed in from both sides, snagged Li and his two companions and dragged them further into the compound. They tied each of the three to a big stake without a word.

Li Jun looked around. He saw four bold gallants sitting in a thatched hall. The first of these had a red beard and brown hair and wore a blue quilted silk tunic. The second, a tall thin fellow with a short mustache was dressed in a dark green cotton shirt with a round collar. The third was swarthy and had a long beard. The fourth had a broad bony face, a curly spade-shaped beard and, like the third fellow, was dressed in a blue quilted tunic. All wore broad-brimmed hats of black felt and carried weapons. The leader shouted at Li Jun.

“Where are you rogues from? What are you doing on our lake?”

“We're traders from Yangzhou. We've come to buy fish.”

“Don't bother to question him, brother,” advised the bony faced man. “He's obviously a spy. Just let me cut his heart out to go with my wine!”

Li Jun said to himself: “I was a smuggler on the Xunyang River for a long time, and for several years a gallant in Liangshan Marsh. Who would have thought I'd end my life here. Well, if I'm finished, I'm finished!” He sighed, looked at Tong Wei and Tong Meng and said: “I got you two into this. We'll all become ghosts together!”

“Don't talk like that,” the brothers replied. “Death doesn't matter. It's only a pity that dying here like this will reflect on Big Brother's prestige.”

The three gazed at each other. Chests high, they waited for death.

The four bold gallants observed them and heard what they said. They exchanged glances. “That leader of theirs is clearly no lowly person,” they remarked.

“Who are you, really?” Red Beard demanded. “What are your names?”

“If you're going to kill us, then kill us,” Li Jun retorted. “Though we die, we're not going to tell you, lest we be shamed before the whole gallant fraternity!”

Convinced that the three were bold fellows like himself, Red Beard jumped up, cut their bonds and released them. The four escorted them into the hall and invited them to be seated. The leader kowtowed before them.

“We have been robbers all our lives,” he said, “but we never have met such chivalrous men as you. Where are you from, gallant sirs? We would be pleased to learn your names.”

“We can see that you four elder brothers must be bold fellows, so we'll tell you. Then you can take us wherever you wish,” said Li Jun. “We are chieftains under Song Jiang of Liangshan Marsh. I am Li Jun the Turbulent River Dragon. These two are brothers—Tong Wei the Dragon from the Cave and Tong Meng the River Churning Clam. Our band has been amnestied by the imperial court. After breaking the Liao Tartars we returned to the capital and were ordered to destroy Fang La. If you are his men, you can turn us in and claim your rewards. We won't offer any resistance.”

The four gallants promptly kowtowed. Kneeling, they said: “We have eyes but couldn't recognize Mount Taishan! Please forgive our rude blunder. We four have nothing to do with Fang La's bandits. Originally we were robbers in the forest, but now we live here in Willow Hamlet. On all sides are deep coves. No one can get in without a boat. Our fishing is only a pretext.

Actually, we grab whatever we can on the lake. Last winter we learned how to swim, and now no one dares to interfere with us. We heard long ago that Song Jiang had gathered some of the boldest gallants under the sky in Liangshan Marsh. His name is well known. We've heard too about Zhang Shun the White Streak in the Waves. We never dreamed we'd meet you here today!"

"Zhang Shun is one of us," said Li Jun. "He also is a naval chieftain. Right now he's chasing bandits around Jiangyin. I'll introduce you to him. May we ask you four your names?"

"Because we were operating in the greenwood, they're kind of odd," said the leader. "Don't laugh! I'm Fei Bao the Red-Beard Dragon. This is Ni Yun the Curly-Haired Tiger, this is Pu Qing the Taihu Python, and that's Di Cheng the Thin-Faced Bear."

Li Jun was very pleased. "Now we need have no doubts about one another." And he explained: "Big Brother Song Jiang is vanguard general of an expedition against Fang La. He wants to take Suzhou but he has no plan. He's sent us three to spy out the terrain. If you four bold fellows will come with us to Song Jiang, I guarantee you'll be made officials. After we've finished Fang La, the emperor will raise you still higher."

"If we wanted positions, we could have become commanders under Fang La long ago," said Fei Bao. "But we seek only a free life, not rank. We'll go through fire and water if you need our help. But if you want to make us officials, we're not interested."

"In that case," said Li Jun, "how about pledging ourselves as blood brothers?"

The four bold fellows gladly agreed. They slaughtered a pig and a sheep, poured cups of wine, and vowed to consider Li Jun their elder brother. Li instructed Tong Wei and Tong Meng to make the same pledge to the others.

Li Jun told of Song Jiang's desire to take Suzhou. "But Fang Mao won't come out and fight," he said, "and the city is surrounded by water. There are

no roads we can advance on, and the creeks are narrow and difficult to navigate. How can we break in?”

“Stay here and relax a couple of days, brother,” Fei Bao advised. “Functionaries from Fang La in Hangzhou go to Suzhou often on government business. We can use this as a means of getting into the city. I'll send a few fishermen to inquire. If any Fang La people are en route, we can decide what to do next.”

Li Jun agreed, Fei Bao sent off the fishermen, and the seven remained in the hamlet, chatting and drinking. Two or three days later, the fishermen returned and reported.

“In Pingwang Town there are about a dozen cargo vessels flying yellow banners from their stern which read *Royal Armor.* They're obviously from Hangzhou. Only six or seven people man each boat.”

“This is our chance,” said Li Jun. “We hope you brothers will help.”

“Let's go,” said Fei Bao.

“If just one of those boats get away,” warned Li Jun, “our plan will fail.”

“Don't worry,” said Fei Bao. “We take full responsibility.” Sixty or seventy small craft were gathered and set sail. The seven gallants sat in seven boats. Fishermen manned the others. All were laden with concealed weapons. The little vessels slipped from the creeks into the river, then spread out.

That night the moon and stars filled the sky. The ten government craft were moored neared the Dragon King Temple at the eastern end of the river. Fei Bao's boat got there first. He whistled shrilly, and the sixty-odd fishing craft closed in and affixed themselves to the government vessels.

Startled sailors rushed out of their cabins, only to be hooked by the grappling poles and tied up in batches of four or five. Those who jumped in the water were fished out and hauled on deck. The little craft pulled the big vessels into the lake, and across to Willow Hamlet.

By then it was the fourth watch. The batches of bound prisoners were weighted with big rocks and thrown into the lake and drowned. Questioning of the two leaders revealed that they were store-house keepers of Fang La's eldest son, Fang Tianding the Prince of Southern Peace. On his orders they had been delivering three thousand suits of armor to Fang Mao the Third Great Prince in Suzhou. Li Jun asked the leaders their names, confiscated their documents, then had them killed.

“Before we take any action, I must consult with Big Brother about this,” he said.

“I'll have you ferried across,” said Fei Bao. “We'd better sneak you through the creeks past the enemy positions.” He directed two fishermen to take Li Jun in a fast boat.

“Conceal the captured vessels and armor in the creek behind the hamlet,” he instructed Fei Bao and the Tong brothers. “Don't let anyone know about them.”

“No problem,” said Fei Bao. He went to attend to it personally.

Two fishermen, propelling a little craft through the creeks, conveyed Li Jun past the enemy positions. He disembarked at Icy Hill Monastery and returned to camp. He told Song Jiang what had happened. Wu Yong, also listening, was overjoyed.

“'Capturing Suzhou will be as easy as spitting on your hands. Let Li Kui, Bao Xu, Xiang Chong and Li Gun take two hundred shield bearers and go to the hamlet on Taihu Lake. There they can work out a plan with Fei Bao and his three gallants. Tomorrow, they can go into action.”

Li Jun crossed the lake with the two fishermen, got more boats, fetched Li Kui and the others, then proceeded to the hamlet and introduced the four chieftains to Fei Bao, who was somewhat startled by the appearance of the Black Whirlwind. He wined, and dined them, as well as the two hundred shield bearers.

The next day, after conferring, Fei Bao and Ni Yun dressed as the store-keepers of the armor, put on southern official uniforms, and pocketed their documents. The fishermen disguised themselves as sailors on the government boats. Li Kui and the two hundred shield bearers hid in the holds. Pu Qing and Di Cheng captained the rear vessel, which carried incendiary equipment.

They were about to sail when a fisherman came and announced: “A boat out there is zig-zagging across the lake.”

“Something's up,” exclaimed Li Jun. He hurried to have a look.

Two men were standing on the prow of the vessel—Dai Zong the Marvellous Traveller and Ling Zhen the Heaven-Shaking Thunder. Li Jun whistled sharply, and the boat flew towards the hamlet. The two men came ashore.

“What brings you here? Is there any news?” asked Li Jun.

“In his rash to get Li Kui to you, Big Brother forgot something important,” said Dai Zong. “He's dispatched me and Ling Zhen specially with a hundred cannon. We couldn't catch you when you were on the lake, and we didn't dare land on these unknown banks. He wants you to enter the city at dawn. Once you get in, fire the cannon as a signal.”

“Perfect!” said Li Jun. He had the cannon barrels and carriages shifted over to his craft and concealed beneath the armor.

When Fei Bao heard that it was Dai Zong, he entertained him with food and wine. Ling Zhen and the ten gunners who had accompanied him hid themselves inside the third boat.

They sailed for Suzhou that night at the fourth watch. They arrived after the fifth. Soldiers on the walls, seeing the southern flags they flew, quickly reported. The official in charge of the gate was General Guo Shiguang the Flying Panther. He mounted the wall, questioned the commanding officer, and demanded the convoy's documents. They were hauled up and examined, then sent to the headquarters of the Third Great Prince for

certification. Only after Guo posted observers below did he open the gate. But he also sent men down to inspect the boats. They reported that they were piled high with armor. Guo let them sail in, one by one, but when ten had entered he had the gate closed again.

An observer dispatched by the Third Great Prince arrived—an official accompanied by five hundred soldiers who took positions along the bank and moored the craft. Li Kui, Bao Xu, Xiang Chong and Li Gun emerged from the cabins. Their rough appearance startled the official, and he hastily inquired who they were.

By way of answer, Xiang Chong and Li Gun charged, with twirling shields. A sword flew, cutting the official down from his horse. Li Kui leaped ashore, swinging his axes. He ploughed into the five hundred soldiers, hacking chunks out of a dozen in a row. The others fled.

Two hundred shield bearers poured from the cabins and swarmed upon the shore. They began setting fires. Ling Zhen positioned his gun carriages, mounted the barrels, and loosed a dozen in a volley that rocked the tower on the wall. From four sides, attackers closed in on the city.

Fang Mao the Third Great Prince, planning in his palace, nearly jumped out of his skin at the sound of the signal cannon. Commanders guarding the various gates rushed with their men towards where the salvoes were thundering without cease. From all of the gates came the report: “Snipers' arrows are mowing down our men! Song soldiers are already on the walls!”

Suzhou was thrown into a turmoil. No one knew how many Song troops had got in. Li Kui the Black Whirlwind and Bao Xu were tearing around the city with two shield bearers slaughtering southern soldiers. Ling Zhen, protected by Li Jun, Dai Zong and the four bold rustics, continued to fire his cannons. Song Jiang sent all three columns against Suzhou. As these fought their way in, the southern troops scattered and fled for their lives.

The Third Great Prince hastily donned his armor and mounted his horse. With six or seven hundred armored troops he attempted to break out of the South Gate. But he bumped into Li Kui and his cohorts, who wreaked havoc among them. The Southerners broke and ran, at a moment when

Sagacious Lu barged out of a lane, brandishing his iron staff. Fang Mao knew he couldn't resist. He turned his steed and galloped back towards his palace.

But Wu Song suddenly emerged from beneath Raven Bridge, chopped the animal's leg with his sword, and brought the prince tumbling to the ground. Another swing cut off Fang Mao's head.

Wu Song presented his trophy to Song Jiang in his new headquarters in the prince's palace. The order was to destroy the southern army and capture as many of the foe as possible. Only Liu Yun managed to get away. With some remnant troops, he fled towards Xiuzhou.

Seated in the palace, Song Jiang ordered a halt to the killing of civilians and directed his men to put out the fires. He also issued a proclamation reassuring the populace. Then he summoned his chieftains to the palace to claim their rewards.

He already knew that Wu Song had slain Fang Mao, Zhu Tong had caught Xu Fang, Shi Jin had captured Zhen Cheng, Sun Li had killed Zhang Wei with his staff, Li Jun had run Chang Sheng through with his lance, and Fan Rui had destroyed Wu Fu. Xuan Zan and Guo Shiguang had inflicted such grievous wounds on each other that both had died beneath Horse Watering Bridge. Many subordinate enemy officers had been made prisoner, and their captors also came forward, seeking recognition.

Song Jiang directed that Xuan Zan's body be laid in a fine coffin with full mourning decorations and that he be buried at the foot of Tiger Mound Hill. The head of Fang Mao and the prisoners Xu Fang and Zhen Cheng were sent to Changzhou for disposition by Governor Zhang. The governor had the two captives sliced to pieces in the public square. Fang Mao's head was dispatched to the capital. Substantial rewards were sent to Suzhou for distribution among the commanders. Zhang then issued an order that Deputy District Commander Liu take over control of Suzhou and that Song Jiang continue with his expedition against the rebels.

Before long a mounted scout arrived in Suzhou with the news: “Deputy District Commander Liu and staff officer Geng are here to assume

command.” Song Jiang and his chieftains went out to greet them and escort them into the city. They were moved into the palace and formally congratulated.

In the prefectural office, Song Jiang conferred with his chieftains. He dispatched scouts to learn what progress his navy was making along the coast. They returned and reported that when the rebel officials in the coastal counties heard that Suzhou had fallen, they had scattered and fled, and that in these counties all was now peaceful. Very pleased, Song Jiang reported the victory in writing to the Central Army and requested the governor to restore all former Song officials to their posts. He then ordered various commanders to take over control of the captured coastal counties and let the naval chieftains who had been holding them return to Suzhou. Within a few days, this was done.

The naval chieftains told Song Jiang that when the three Ruan brothers attacked Changshu, Shi En had been lost. Kong Liang died in the assault on Kunshan. Neither of them knew how to swim, and each had fallen into the water and drowned. Shi Xiu, Li Ying the others had all come back.

Another two chieftains gone. Very unhappy, Song Jiang sighed without end.

Fei Bao and his three gallant companions came to bid him farewell. They were leaving for home. When his pleas that they stay proved in vain, he rewarded them and instructed Li Jun to escort them to Willow Hamlet. With Tong Wei and Tong Meng, Li Jun saw them home, and there the four bold rustics wined and dined the three chieftains. Fei Bao rose and, handing a cup of wine to Li Jun, said a few words.

And as a result, Li Jun's fame spread across the seas, his name was known throughout the world. He became king of a foreign land, but never encroached upon the borders of China. Truly, realizing its fate the toad sloughs off its skin, performing great deeds a fish becomes a dragon.

What were the words Fei Bao spoke to Li Jun? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 94
In Ninghai District Song Jiang Wears Mourning
At Yongjin Gate Zhang Shun Becomes a Spirit

Fei Bao said to Li Jun: “I'm a crude stupid fellow, but I've heard clever persons say: 'One must have failures as well as successes, one must have sorrow as well as joy.' You've built a career in Liangshan Marsh in a score or more years, winning every battle, and when you defeated the Liao Tartars you lost none of your brothers. But now you're going against Fang La, and clearly your vitality is crumbling. You won't be able to last much longer.

“Why am I not willing to become an official or general? Because once peace is restored, there would be one person after another trying to take my life. As the old saying goes: 'In order to keep the peace, the general himself can have no peace.' That's very well put. We four and you three have pledged ourselves blood brothers. Why not, while the tide is still with us, find a quiet refuge? Let's put some money together, buy a large boat, hire a few sailors, and search the rivers and seas for a good place to settle down and live out the rest of our lives. What could be sweeter?”

Li Jun bowed and replied: “Your words are most enlightening, brother. What you suggest would indeed be fine. It's just that we still haven't beaten Fang La. I can't cast aside my obligation to Song Jiang. It isn't time yet for me to leave. If I were to go with you today, I'd be violating my chivalrous duties. If you're willing to wait until we've conquered Fang La, I and my two brothers will gladly join you. You can start preparing now. Heaven crush me if I go back on my word! I'll be no real man!”

“We'll make arrangements about the boat,” the rustic gallants said. “We'll be looking forward to your arrival, brother. Don't disappoint us!” Li Jun and Fei Bao sealed their pact with wine. All vowed to carry it out scrupulously.

The next day, Li Jun said good-bye to the four, and with the Tong brothers went back to Song Jiang. He told him they had no desire to become officials —they felt they would be happier remaining fisherman. Song Jiang sighed, then went on readying his land and naval forces for the offensive. Wujiang County was already free of rebels, and the Song forces had taken Pingwang Town. They set out now for a drive on Xiuzhou Prefecture.

Duan Kai, the general responsible for its defense, had learned that Fang Mao the Third Great Prince had been killed in Suzhou, and his only thought was to wind things up and leave. When he heard that the main Song army was already not far from the city, and saw in the distance the advancing banners blocking out the sun on land and water in a combined operation of boats and cavalry, he was scared stiff. The vanguard under Guan Sheng and Qin Ming had reached the city walls, and their naval vessels were closing in on the West Gate.

“You needn't attack,” he called from the ramparts. “We will surrender.” And he ordered that the gates be opened.

He directed that Song Jiang be welcomed with sheep and wine, and conducted him, amid burning incense and flowery lanterns, to the prefectural center. Duan Kai was the first to present himself. Song Jiang promised him that he would be considered a good official, and issued proclamations reassuring the local populace.

“I originally was a law-abiding citizen of Muzhou Prefecture,” said Duan Kai. “But I was repeatedly oppressed by Fang La, and was compelled to serve under him. Today the Celestial Army has arrived. I wouldn't dream of not submitting.” People like Duan Kai realized the Heavenly destiny of the Song Dynasty.

“Who is defending the city of Hangzhou in the Ninghai Military District?” Song Jiang asked him. “How many effectives has he?”

“Hangzhou covers a wide area, and is densely populated. North and east is dry land, the river is on the south, to the west is the lake. It's held by Fang La's son Fang Tianding the Prince of Southern Peace. He commands an army of more than seventy thousand, and has twenty-four generals and four marshals—a total of twenty-eight.

“Two of them are especially formidable. One is a monk from Shezhou, known as the Buddha of Precious Light. His original name was Deng Yuanjue. He wields an iron Buddhist staff weighing over fifty catties. Everyone calls him 'National Advisor'.

“The other, Shi Bao, comes from Fuzhou. His weapon is a comet hammer, and when he throws it, he never misses. He also has a fine sword called the Wind Splitter. It can cut bronze and iron. Even three layers of armor the Wind Splitter slices right through.

“The remaining twenty-six are all selected generals, all extremely tough and courageous. You mustn't underestimate this foe, Excellency.”

Song Jiang rewarded Duan Kai, and ordered him to report these matters to Governor Zhang. Later on, Duan Kai marched with the governor's army and took part in the defense of Suzhou. Deputy District Commander Liu Guangshi was made military governor of Xiuzhou. Now, Song Jiang shifted his troops to the village of Zuili Pavilion and established a base.

After banqueting and rewarding the chieftains, he discussed with them the attack on Hangzhou. Chai Jin the Small Whirlwind rose to speak.

“Ever since you rescued me in Gaotang Prefecture, you have lavished your affection on me and given me undeserved honors,” he said to Song Jiang. “So far, due to my own weak fate and personal inadequacies, I have not been able to requite this benevolence. I would like, today, to penetrate into Fang La's lair as a spy. If I can perform with merit I will be of service to the throne and will reflect honor on you, brother, at the same time. I wonder whether you will permit me to try?”

Song Jiang was very pleased. “If you can learn the enemy's internal situation we shall be able to attack and capture the chief bandit Fang La, deliver him to the capital and, for this small achievement, share in the honors. But I'm afraid the task may be too much of a hardship, brother.”

“What of it? The possibility of death doesn't daunt me. My only request is that Yan Qing go with me. He knows the local dialects and is quick to seize opportunities.”

“Of course, brother. Yan Qing is with Lu Junyi's forces at the moment. I'll dispatch an order for him to come at once.”

Just then someone announced: “General Lu's special emissary Yan Qing has arrived to report a victory.”

“You're sure to succeed, brother,” Song Jiang said happily to Chai Jin. “He's come precisely when we need him. It's a good omen.”

Chai Jin, too, was delighted.

Yati Qing entered the tent and respectfully greeted Song Jiang. They welcomed him with food and wine.

“Have you come by land or water, brother?” he was asked.

“By boat,” he replied.

“Dai Zong told us you were attacking Huzhou. How is it going?” Song Jiang queried.

“After leaving Xuanzhou, General Lu divided his forces into two,” said Yan Qing. “Half went with the vanguard against Huzhou. They killed the puppet garrison head Gong Wen and five of his sub-commanders and took the city. They destroyed and dispersed the enemy troops, reassured the populace, and dispatched a written report to Governor Zhang requesting that he send a prefect to take control for the crown. I was ordered to report the news to you. The other half, under Lin Chong, was ordered to capture Lone Pine Pass, then join us for the Hangzhou offensive. I've heard that they're fighting every day along the road to the pass, but they haven't been able to take it. General Lu and Zhu Wu have gone personally to assume command, leaving General Huyan to hold Huzhou until the governor sends a prefect. Then he is to attack and take Deqing County, before joining the offensive against Hangzhou.”

“How many chieftains are involved in these campaigns? Can you tell me the names?”

“Twenty-three have gone for the assault on Long Pine Pass,” Yan Qing replied. “They are Lu Junyi, Zhu Wu, Lin Chong, Dong Ping, Zhang Qin, Xie Zhen, Xie Bao, Lu Fang, Guo Sheng, Ou Peng, Deng Fei, Li Zhong,

Zhou Tong, Zou Yuan, Zou Run, Sun Xin, Mistress Gu, LiLi, Bai Sheng, Tang Long, Zhu Gui, Zhu Fu and Shi Qian.

“Nineteen, including Huyan Zhuo, are to hold Huzhou the moment and later attack Deqing County. They are Huyan Zhuo, Suo Chao, Mu Hong, Lei Heng, Yang Xiong, Liu Tang, Shan Tinggui, Wei Dingguo, Chen Da, Yang Chun, Xue Yong, Du Qian, Mu Chun, Li Yun, Shi Yong, Gong Wang, Ding Desun, Zhang Qing and Sun Erniang.

“When I left the actions were already being carried out.”

“Dividing the force into two, under the circumstances, is obviously the best method. Lord Chai Jin has asked that you go with him into Fang La's territory and gather intelligence. Are you willing?”

“Certainly, if that is your wish, Commander-in-Chief.” Pleased, Chai Jin said: “I will dress as a white-robed minor scholar. You disguise yourself as my servant. We'll stroll along carrying a lute, a sword, and a bag of books. Master and man—no one will suspect us. At the coast we'll find a boat and sail past Yuezhou, then follow a small road to Zhuji County. Then we'll cross the hills. It's not far from there to Muzhou.”

“Yuezhou is part of our Central Plain,” said Song Jiang. “Fang La has no control in that sector. I'll notify the local officials to give you safe conduct.”

On the day designated Chai Jin and Yan Qing bid Song Jiang farewell and departed with lute, sword and books. They headed for the coast to find a boat and commence their intelligence operations. Of that we'll say no more.

Meanwhile, Military Advisor Wu Yong, addressing Song Jiang, said: “Along half the southern side of Hangzhou is the Qiantang River. It empties into the sea. A few men in a small boat could sail in around the coast, pass through the Zheshan Gate, and get up near the South Gate of the city. If they fired cannons and raised signal flags, they could cause great alarm in Hangzhou. Which of your naval chieftains could handle this mission?”

“Let us go,” cried Zhang Heng and the three Ruan brothers, almost before the words were out of his mouth.

“Hangzhou's west side fronts on the lake. We'll need naval forces to get across there, too,” said Song Jiang. “I can't let you all go.”

“Zhang Heng and Ruan the Seventh, then,” Wu Yong said to the two chieftains. “And you can take Hou Jian and Duan Jingzhu.”

The chosen four set off with thirty or so sailors, and took with them a dozen cannons and signal flags. They skirted the coast until they found a craft, then sailed up along the Qiantang River.

Hear me, reader. This is a very diverse tale, handed down to us from the story-tellers of old. We couldn't possibly tell it all at one sitting. But we will sketch the broad outline, as you shall see. Remember it, for only thus will you be able to follow the complications and subtleties of the plot.

Song Jiang returned to Xiuzhou to plan the attack on Hangzhou. Suddenly, he was informed that an emissary was arriving from the Eastern Capital with imperial wine and rewards. Song Jiang and his commanders, high and low, welcomed him into the city, expressed their thanks, and feasted him at a banquet at which the imperial wine was served. During the course of the drinking the emissary said the emperor had a slight illness, and that the Royal Hospital wanted to summon Dr. An Daoquan to treat him. An imperial order had been issued, and the emissary had come to fetch the doctor. Song Jiang dared not refuse. The next day, he and his chieftains saw Dr. An off ten *li* out of the city on his journey back to the capital with the emissary.

After dispensing rewards among the chieftains, he selected a day for dedicating his flags at a sacrificial ceremony and starting his march. Then he bid farewell to Deputy District Commander Liu Guangshi and staff officer Geng, mounted, and set forth, advancing on land and water, navy and cavalry coordinating. When they neared Chongte, the rebel general who was holding the county fled to Hangzhou.

Meanwhile, Fang La's eldest son Prince Fang Tianding was consulting with his generals in his external palace. It was located on the site of where the

Soaring Dragon Palace stands today. The twenty-eight senior officers were discussing how to meet the threat of the Song army. Of these, four were marshals: Buddha of Precious Light Deng Yuanjue the National Advisor, Marshal Shi Bao the Great Southerner, General Li Tianrun the National Suppressor, and General Si Xingfang the Defender of the Country. Their military titles had been conferred on them by Fang La.

“Since Song Jiang has crossed the Yangzi as the vanguard of a combined land and naval operation, we've lost to him three large shires,” said Prince Fang Tianding. “Only Hangzhou remains as the bulwark of our Southern Country. If we lose that, how will Muzhou stand? Not long ago our Astrologer the eunuch Pu Wenying reported to the throne that stars of earthly fiends would be invading our Wu area, and indeed we have suffered heavy losses there, precisely to those Song forces. You officers all hold high ranks, you owe our nation the utmost loyalty. Let no one be remiss in his duties to the crown.”

“Rest assured, Your Highness,” the generals replied. “With our crack troops and fierce commanders, we're more than a match for Song Jiang. Although we've lost several prefectures, the officers in charge were all incompetents. That's why they were defeated. We hear that Song Jiang and Lu Junyi are advancing on Hangzhou in three columns. If Your Highness and the National Advisor will hold the district of Ninghai as our eternal base, we generals will go forth and meet the foe.”

Very pleased, the prince ordered his army to divide into three columns also to counter the enemy offensive. He retained only National Advisor Teng as defender of the city. The other three marshals each commanded a column. Si Xingfang, with four generals, was ordered to go to the relief of Deqing Prefecture. Li Tianrun, with four generals, was directed to reinforce Lone Pine Pass. Shi Bao as commanding marshal, plus eight generals, were to meet the foe's main contingent.

Each marshal was presented with gold and silks as an encouragement to an early departure. Marshal Si, on the way to Deqing with his column, headed first for Fengkou Town. Marshal Li and his column's first objective on their march to Lone Pine Pass was the prefecture of Yuhang.

Song Jiang and his army, winding forward, arrived at Linping Mountain. They saw on the summit a swath of red flags and considerable activity. Song Jiang sent Hua Rong and Qin Ming ahead as advance pickets, and urged his naval officers to get their boats—which were being transported on wheels—across the Changan Dyke.

Hua Rong and Qin Ming, with a thousand men, rounded the entrance to the mountains and ran directly into Shi Bao and his southern troops.

Two of his generals promptly charged the two chieftains. One was named Wang Ren, the other Feng Yi, and each wielded a long lance. The Song contingent spread out in battle formation. Qin Ming, brandishing his wolf-toothed cudgel, took on Feng Yi. Hua Rong, lance at the level, met Wang Ren. The four steeds dashed together, and their riders fought more than ten rounds, with neither side emerging as victor. The two chieftains observed that the southern army was being reinforced from the rear.

“A brief rest,” they called, and all rode back to their respective positions.

“Don't be so impatient for battle,” Hua Rong said. “Report the news to Big Brother, quickly. He'll have to discuss this.”

A dispatch was rushed to the Central Army. Song Jiang, accompanied by Zhu Tong, Xu Ning, Huang Xin and Sun Li, hurried to the front. Southern generals Wang Ren and Feng Yi rode forward once more.

“We dare you defeated officers to come out and Fight again,” they yelled.

Qin Ming, angered, waved his wolf-toothed cudgel and galloped towards Feng Yi. Wang Ren challenged Hua Rong. Before Hua could respond, Xu Ning kicked his mount and raced out with levelled lance. Xu Ning and Hua Rong were first and second in command in their unit—one gold lancer, one silver. Hua Rong now hastened after, fitting an arrow to his bow. When he was close enough, before the two could clash, he shot. The feathered missile hit Wang Ren and knocked him from his saddle.

The southern troops were much disheartened. Feng Yi, startled to see his colleague fall, grew clumsy. A blow on the head from Qin Ming's cudgel

felled him to the ground.

The southern soldiers scattered and fled, with the slaughtering Song army hot on their heels. Shi Bao was unable to stem the tide. He retreated to the Gaoting Mountains and made camp near New East Bridge. But the Southerners didn't feel secure. They withdrew into the city that evening.

By the next day, the imperial forces had already crossed the Gaoting Mountains and themselves made camp at New East Bridge. Song Jiang directed that the army divide into three columns and proceed against Hangzhou in a pincers offensive. The first column—an infantry unit — would march from the town of Tangzhen against the city's East Gate. The second column—a naval unit—would go from New North Bridge to take Gutang, cut the western approaches, and assail the city gates facing the lake.

The center column was to consist of infantry, cavalry and naval forces and be divided into three detachments. Their objectives were Hangzhou's Beiguan Gate and Genshan Gate. Behind the advance detachment would come Song Jiang, Military Advisor Wu Yong and the overall command, followed by the third detachment—which would provide reinforcements and supplies on both land and water.

These dispositions having been agreed upon, the three columns set forth.

We'll speak first of the central column's advance detachment under Guan Sheng. Probing to New East Bridge, they encountered not a single southern soldier. Guan Sheng grew suspicious, pulled back and reported by messenger to Song Jiang, who then replied via Dai Zong.

“We cannot advance carelessly. Let two chieftains go out with pickets every day,” was Song Jiang's order.

Hua Rong and Qin Ming went the first day, Xu Ning and Hao Siwen the second. But several days passed without any of the enemy coming forward to do battle.

Then Xu Ning and Hao Siwen, with a few dozen cavalry, roved as far as Hangzhou's Beiguan Gate. It was wide open. They rode up to the drawbridge. Battle drums thundered on the city wall, and out charged a troop of horsemen. The two chieftains hastily wheeled their mounts. Wild shouts rose on the road skirting the west of Hangzhou, and more than a hundred enemy cavalry galloped before them. Xu Ning, fighting desperately, managed to break through, but when he glanced back, there was no sign of Hao Siwen. Then he looked again, and saw scores of enemy officers leading the captured Hao into the city.

As Xu Ning hurriedly turned, and arrow struck him in the neck. He raced off with the missile still imbedded in his flesh, pursued by six southern generals. Luckily, he ran into Guan Sheng and was rescued, but he fainted from loss of blood. The six generals, chased off, returned to the city.

Guan Sheng hastily reported to Song Jiang, who rushed to see Xu Ning. The chieftain was bleeding from every orifice. Weeping, Song Jiang summoned an army doctor. The arrow as extracted and a salve for wounds from metal weapons applied. Song Jiang ordered that Xu Ning be placed on one of the naval vessels to rest, and he personally supervised the transfer. Four times Xu lapsed into unconsciousness. Only then did they realize he had been struck by a poisoned arrow. Song Jiang gazed up at the heavens and sighed.

“Our marvellous Dr. An Daoquan has been called to the capital. We have no talented physician here who can save him. We're going to lose another of our limbs!” Song Jiang was very distraught.

Wu Yong urged him to return to camp, and not let his feelings for a brother distract him from important military problems, to the detriment of the country. Song Jiang had Xu Ning sent to Xiuzhou to recuperate. Half a month of treatment was in vain. The poisoned arrow wound could not be cured, and Xu Ning died. But that was later.

Now, Song Jiang sent an agent into the midst of the foe to inquire about Hao Siwen. The next day he received a report: “On the city wall above the Beiguan Gate, Hao's head is hanging on display from a bamboo pole. We've just heard that Fang Tianding has cut his body to pieces!”

Song Jiang felt very badly. Half a month later, he received news of the death of Xu Ning. The loss of these two chieftains created difficulties for him in deploying his troops. He remained holding the highway.

Li Jun, whose column arrived at New North Bridge, sent a unit ahead to scout out the road to Gutang, deep in the hills. A report was quickly brought back: Hao Siwen had been decapitated and Xu Ning killed by a poisoned arrow.

“It seems to me,” Li Jun said to Zhang Shun, “our main objective is the juncture of the roads to Lone Pine Pass and the Huzhou-Deqing sector. Enemy soldiers are in and out of there all the time. But while we're throttling their transport lines, they can be attacking us from two sides. We don't have enough men to meet a double assault. We'd be better off pushing into the western hills and setting up there. Our battlefield will be West Lake. Behind the hills is the road to Zhongxi. It's a good escape route.”

He dispatched a junior officer to get Song Jiang's approval, then led his troops over Taoyuan Ridge into the western hills. They made camp at what is known as Lingyin Monastery. He also established a small encampment on the north side of the hills at Xixi Gap, today called Gutang Hollow. His forward pickets were at Tangjiawa.

“The southern soldiers have withdrawn into Hangzhou,” Zhang Shun said to Li Jun. “They haven't come out to fight in half a month. If we just hang around in these hills we'll never earn any distinctions. What I'd like to do is swim across the lake, slip in under the water gate and set some fires. That will be your signal to assail the water gate. Once you've taken it, report the seizure to Big Brother, and all three columns can attack Hangzhou together.”

“A good idea. But I'm afraid you can't do it alone.”

“After all the kindness Big Brother has shown me over the years, it will be a small recompense.”

“Wait at least till I've requested him to send us reinforcements.”

“We can be doing both at the same time. He'll know by the time you've entered the city.”

That evening, Zhang Shun concealed a sharp dagger on his person, ate a good meal replete with wine, and walked to the edge of West Lake. He gazed at the green hills on three sides, at the azure water, and peered across at the distant city, with its four closed gates fronting on the opposite shore. The gates were called Qiantang, Yongjin, Qingbo and Qianhu.

Reader, please note, West Lake was not then what it became subsequent to the southern migration. Only after the Golden Tartars and the Song Empire made peace and ended their warfare, and the emperor moved the capital to Hangzhou, did the area achieve its great prosperity. Dozens of scenic spots were set up along the lake. The green hills on three sides provided a remarkable background. The colorful boats and taverns, the cool pavilions overlooking the water, were indeed a pleasure to behold. As the famous Su Dongpo put it in one of his poems:

Neath Clear skies how charmingly glistens the lake,

Strangely lovely the hills when shrouded in rain.

West Lake may with Xi Zi compare,

Adorned or natural, equally fair.

Another of his verses remarks:

Hill after green tower beyond tower,

Song and dance at West Lake endlessly flow.

Visitors drunk on the heady warm breeze,

Consider Hangzhou another Bianzhou.

Subsequently others also wrote poems and rhymes about the beauties of West Lake—far too many to record.

On Xiling Bridge, Zhang Shun halted and stared for a long time. It was a warm spring day, the lake was a deep blue, the surrounding hills were jade green.

“I grew up on the Xunyang River and encountered many a wind and wave,” Zhang Shun mused, “but never have I seen such an enthralling body of water! Whoever died here would be a happy ghost!”

He removed his cloth shirt and put it beneath the bridge. He bound his hair in a topknot with red yarn. He tied a silk skirt round his waist with a sash, and from this hung a dagger. Barefoot, he plunged into the lake and swam across under water. It was around the first watch, and the moon was pale.

When he neared Yongjin Gate, Zhang Shun raised his head above the surface and listened. A drum on the city wall struck the fourth interval of the first watch. The area between the wall and the lakefront was still and deserted. Four or five soldiers were watching from the ramparts. Zhang Shun quickly submerged. After a time, he again poked his head out. There was no one to be seen upon the wall.

He groped in the channel beneath the water gate. It was blocked by an iron lattice, and above that, a heavy drape. The ropes by which the drape was attached were hung with copper bells. Zhang Shun, finding the lattice-work impenetrable, tugged at the drape, setting the bells to jangling. Men shouted on the wall. Zhang Shun, moving swiftly beneath the surface, swam back to the lake.

Soldiers came down and examined the drape, but they couldn't find anyone, and returned to the ramparts. “Some large fish must have bumped into it,” they concluded, “and set those bells off.” They maintained a lookout for a while, then went back to sleep.

Zhang Shun listened. Soon, the drum on the wall struck the third watch. He waited a long time, till he was sure the soldiers were sleeping soundly. Then he crept ashore. Since he couldn't get in through the water gate, and since he couldn't see anyone on the wall, he decided he would attempt to climb over.

“If there are soldiers up there, I'll be throwing my life away,” he said to himself. “Let's see.”

He felt around for a clod of earth and tossed it up. Soldiers who weren't asleep raised a clamor. Again they descended and inspected the water gate, and again they found nothing. From the tower on the wall, they peered out at the lake. There wasn't a single boat anywhere. Prince Fang Tianding had ordered all craft to moor outside Qingbo Gate or in Jingci Cove, and no other place.

“Queer,” the soldiers exclaimed. “It's surely a ghost. We'll just go to sleep and ignore it.”

Although that was what they said, actually they didn't retire, but crouched vigilantly behind the ramparts. Zhang Shun listened for an entire watch. Nothing was stirring. He crept to the foot of the wall. There was no sound from the watchman's drum. Zhang Shun cautiously threw up another clod. Still no response.

“It's the fourth watch already. The sky will soon be light,” he thought. “It's now or never!”

He was halfway up the wall when a loud tattoo roused the soldiers. He leaped down into the channel and started to swim. A deluge of arrows, javelins and stones poured into him from the ramparts. Poor heroic Zhang Shun gave his life in the channel at Yongjin Gate!

That same day, Song Jiang received a report from Li Jun: “Zhang Shun is swimming into Hangzhou. He'll set fires as a signal for us to attack.” The information was transmitted to the troops outside of East Gate.

Song Jiang conferred in his tent with Wu Yong that night until the fourth watch. Wearily, he dismissed his aides and reclined his head on the table.

A sudden gust of icy wind brought him bolt upright. The lamplight dimmed. It was frightfully cold. When his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he saw a figure that was neither ghost nor human, standing in the chill mist. It was spattered with blood.

“Big Brother has lavished his kindness upon me for many years,” said the figure in a low voice. “I offer my dead body as recompense. I was killed today by javelins and arrows at Yongjin Gate. I come to bid you farewell.”

“Aren't you brother Zhang Shun?” Song Jiang cried. He turned and saw on the other side of the tent another three or four bloodstained figures. He couldn't make out who they were. He burst into tears and awoke. It had all been a dream.

Aides, hearing the sound of his weeping, rushed into the tent. “How strange,” said Song Jiang. He asked the military advisor to interpret the dream for him.

“You were just over-tired,” said Wu Yong, “and you had a nightmare.”

Song Jiang told exactly what had occurred in his dream. Wu Yong replied soothingly: “Didn't Li Jun say that Zhang Shun was going to cross the lake and set signal fires in the city? It was on your mind and you had a bad dream.”

“Zhang Shun was a very clever fellow. If he perished, it surely was a blameless death,” Song Jiang avowed.

“That's a very dangerous stretch, from the shore to the city wall. It's quite probable he lost life, and his ghost came in a dream to inform you.”

“But who were the other three or four?”

Neither Song Jiang nor Wu Yong could guess. They sat talking until daybreak. Nothing seemed to be happening in the city, and this made them

all the more suspicious.

In the afternoon, Li Jun rushed a dispatch to them: “Zhang Shun tried to scale the wall at Yongjin Gate, and was killed in the water by arrows! His head is hanging from a bamboo pole on the wall west of the lake!”

Song Jiang wept and collapsed in a faint. Wu Yong and the other chieftains all felt terrible. Zhang Shun was exceptionally good to people, and was very well liked.

“I feel worse than if I lost my father or mother,” cried Song Jiang. “The agony goes to my very heart and marrow!”

“You should concentrate on important national affairs, brother,” Wu Yong and the chieftains urged. “Don't let your grief injure your health.”

“I must go to the lakeside and mourn him.”

“It's too risky. If the enemy finds out, they'll surely attack.”

“I know how to deal with that.”

Song Jiang sent Li Kui, Bao Xu, Xiang Chong and Li Gun on ahead with five hundred infantry to reconnoitre. He himself followed with Shi Xiu, Dai Zong, Fan Rui and Ma Lin and another five hundred. They proceeded quietly along the paths in the western hills towards Li Jun's camp. On learning that they were coming, Li Jun met them halfway. He led the chieftains into the meditation hall of the Lingyin Monastery for a rest. Song Jiang again wept. He asked the monks to pray that Zhang Shun's ghost be allowed to become a spirit and enter Heaven.

The next evening, he directed a junior officer to erect a white banner on Xiling Bridge by the lake shore, reading: *Soul of Departed Brother and General Zhang Shun,* and lay out many objects for a sacrificial ceremony. He also gave secret instructions to Li Kui. At the start of the road leading to the northern hills he put Fan Rui, Ma Lin and Shi Xiu into ambush on both sides of the bridge. Dai Zong he kept with him.

Shortly before the first watch, Song Jiang donned a white robe and golden helmet bound in mourning silk, and walked with Dai Zong and six or seven monks from Small Stroll Hill to Xiling Bridge. The young officer had already tethered a black pig and a white sheep, laid out sacrificial objects of gold and silver, and lit candles and lanterns and incense.

Song Jiang testified to his friendship with Zhang Shun and, facing the Yongjin Gate, wept. Dai Zong stood by his side. The monks rang their bells and chanted scriptures. They called to the soul of Zhang Shun, beseeching it to descend on the spirit flag. Then Dai Zong read the sacrificial address, and Song Jiang poured the libation wine upon the ground. Weeping, he raised his head to the eastern heavens.

Suddenly, shouts arose on either side of the bridge. Drums thundered in the northern and southern hills, and from each direction a troop of horsemen came tearing down to seize Song Jiang.

Truly, a place of sacrifice to a chivalrous departed comrade became a small battlefield in the service of the sovereign; the slaughter of a few southern officers stirred the waves of West Lake sky high.

How did Song Jiang and Dai Zong meet the foe? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 95
Zhang Shun's Ghost Catches Fang Tianding
Song Jiang by a Ruse Takes Ninghai District

When he went with Dai Zong to sacrifice to the spirit of Zhang Shun at Xiling Bridge, Song Jiang hadn't realized that Prince Fang Tianding knew about it and ordered two columns under ten generals to capture him. Now these burst out of the city and came charging forward, five via the southern hills, five via the northern, leading a total of three thousand soldiers. They had emerged through the Front and Rear Gates around midnight.

The imperial units lying in ambush to the left and right of the bridge, five thousand men in each, saw the torches on the road ahead. They promptly lit their own torches and advanced in two bodies to meet Prince Fang's contingents marching from the northern and southern hills. Finding their foe prepared and waiting, the Southerners beat a hasty retreat, pursued by imperial forces on either flank.

One column, hurrying to go back across the river, was surprised by the Ruan brothers' unit of five thousand. It swarmed out from behind Baoshu Pagoda Hill, cut off the escape route, captured one general and killed another. The other column was intercepted at Dingxiang Bridge by five hundred infantry under Li Kui. Shield twirlers Xiang Chong and Li Gun plunged in among the foe, and their throwing knives quickly dispatched a southern general. Bao Xu hacked another down with his sword, while Li Kui's axes cleaved a third in twain. Most of the southern soldiers were driven into the lake and drowned.

By the time reinforcements rushed from the city Song Jiang's troops had withdrawn into the hills. They reassembled at the Lingyin Monastery, and each hero came forward to claim his reward. Together, the two units had captured more than five hundred good horses.

Song Jiang left Shi Xiu, Fan Rui and Ma Lin to aid Li Jun in guarding the hillside emplacement overlooking West Lake, and ordered them to prepare to assault the city. He returned with Dai Zong and Li Kui to the camp on Mount Gaoting. He met with Wu Yong and other chieftains in his tent.

“By following our plan,” he said to the military advisor, “We've already killed four of their generals and captured a fifth. We're sending him to Governor Zhang for execution.”

Only the situation in Lone Pine Pass and Deqing was unknown to Song Jiang. He sent Dai Zong to find out. A few days later the Marvellous Traveller returned and reported.

“Lu Junyi has taken Lone Pine Pass and sooner or later will be arriving in this sector.”

Pleased but worried, Song Jiang asked: “How are our officers and men?'

“I have the whole story. But you'd better read it in this dispatch. Please don't be upset.”

“We must have lost more of our brothers. Don't try and conceal anything. Tell me everything frankly.”

“Lone Pine Pass has high mountains on either side, with only a single road running through it. On the heights, controlling the pass is a fort, and beside it is a tree, dozens of meters high, from which a lookout can see far in every direction. Below are groves of pine. Three generals command the fort. The first is called Wu Sheng, the second Jiang Yin, the third Wei Heng. In the beginning they came down every day and battled with Panther Head Lin Chong until he wounded Jiang Yin with his lance. After that, Wu Sheng dared not come out, but remained holding the pass.”

“Then Li Tianyou and four other southern generals arrived as reinforcements. They emerged the next day and gave battle. Lu Fang killed Li Tianyou with his lance after nearly sixty rounds. The enemy soldiers retreated into the pass and remained there. Our troops waited in vain for several days. General Lu sent Ou Peng, Deng Fei, Li Zhong and Zhou Tong to find an approach up the sharp and dangerous mountain heights. They were taken by surprise by Li Tianrun, who charged out of the fort to avenge his brother. With one sweep of his sword he killed Zhou Tong, and Li Zhong was wounded. If our rescue force hadn't arrived in time, all four scouts would have been lost. As it was, three were able to return to camp.

“The next day General Two Spears Dong Ping, burning for vengeance, reined his steed at the foot of the pass and loudly reviled the enemy commanders. A cannon ball skimmed him so closely that the concussion injured his left arm. He couldn't use his lance and had to return to camp and have the arm put in splints.

“He wanted to go out again the next day, but Lu Junyi wouldn't let him. Another night passed. The arm was slightly better. Without telling General Lu, Dong Ping conferred secretly with Zhang Qin, and the two set out on foot. Li Tianrun and Zhang Tao came down from the fort to give battle. Dong wanted to take Li alive, and they fought ten rounds. But Dong's skill didn't match his zeal. His left arm had been wounded and he had to fall back. Li drove him out of the pass.

“Zhang Qin then thrust at Li with his lance. Li dodged behind a pine. The point of the weapon sank deep into the tree. While Zhang was frantically trying to pull it out, Li stabbed him through the stomach, and he collapsed to the ground. Dong saw him go down, and he started to rush forward with his two spears. But Zhang Tao, behind him, swung his sword and cleaved him in twain at the waist.

“By the time General Lu learned about the fight, it was too late to go to the rescue, and the enemy soldiers had already withdrawn to their fort. There was nothing he could do about it.

“He sent Sun Xin and Mistress Gu, husband and wife disguised as refugees, deep into the mountains, where they found a path to the fort. They led LiLi, Tang Long, Shi Qian and Bai Sheng up this path in the middle of the night and set the fort on fire. The southern generals realized our forces were already in the pass, so they abandoned the fort and fled. When General Lu took over and made a count of our troops, he discovered that Sun Xin and Mistress Gu had captured southern general Wu Sheng, LiLi and Tang Long had nabbed Jiang Yin, and Shi Qian and Bai Sheng had caught Wei Heng—the original commanders of the fort. All three were delivered to Governor Zhang. The bodies of Dong Ping, Zhang Qin and Zhou Tong were recovered and buried above the pass.

“General Lu chased the enemy soldiers forty-five *li* beyond the pass, caught up and engaged Li Tianrun in battle. They fought more than thirty rounds, and Lu killed Li with his lance. The southern reinforcement troops were in no condition to fight, and they retreated with the three remaining generals. Lu Junyi will be here soon. If you don't believe me, Commander-in-Chief, you can read this dispatch.”

Song Jiang read the document, deeply depressed. Tears gushed from his eyes.

“General Lu has won a victory,” said Wu Yong. “We can move troops to form the other side of a pincers. We'll surely defeat the Southerners. What we should do now is link up with Huyan Zhuo's column in Huzhou.”

“You're absolutely right,” said Song Jiang.

He ordered Li Kui, Bao Xu, Xiang Chong and Li Gun to go with three thousand infantry over the hills and make the connection. Black Whirlwind, thanking Heaven and Earth, set forth with the contingent.

For his attack on Hangzhou's East Gate, Song Jiang dispatched Zhu Tong with five thousand infantry and cavalry. They advanced rapidly along the Tangzhen road from the village where they had been camped to a point outside Vegetable Market Gate, as the East Gate was also known. The eastern suburbs along the river were then heavily populated, with more homes and shops than in the city, and many vegetable gardens and orchards. Here, the Song forces spread out, and Sagacious Lu, iron staff in hand, strode to the foot of the walls.

“Come out, you friggin barbarians,” he shouted. “I dare you to fight!” The soldiers on the ramparts hurriedly reported to the prince's palace. Monk of Precious Light Deng Yuanjue the National Advisor, learning that it was a monk who was issuing the challenge, addressed himself to the prince.

“I've heard that in Liangshan Marsh there is a monk called Sagacious Lu who wields an iron staff,” he said. “If Your Highness will mount the wall at

East Gate, you can watch me go a few rounds with him.”

Prince Fang Tianding was very pleased. He issued his instructions. Accompanied by Marshal Shi Bao, he went with his eight top generals to Vegetable Market Gate. The gate was opened, the drawbridge lowered, and Deng and five hundred infantry swordsmen sped forth.

“So the southern army has a shaven-pate of its own,” Sagacious Lu said to himself. “I'll give the churl a hundred licks of my staff!” Without a word, he charged.

In the shadows of the weeping willows, on the lush green turf, two silvery serpents flew, a pair of jade dragons leaped. The furious Lu had not a bit of cleanliness in his heart. The angry Deng was completely devoid of compassion. When did the first ever respect the Buddhist laws? He murdered people in the dark of the moon! When did the second ever read the scriptures? He set fires when the wind was high!

They fought more than fifty rounds, but neither could vanquish the other. Prince Fang, watching from the wall top, was filled with admiration.

“I've heard of Sagacious Lu the Tattooed Monk of Liangshan Marsh, but I didn't realize he was so formidable! He certainly deserves his reputation,” he said to Shi Bao. “Fighting all this time, he hasn't yielded an inch to our Precious Light Monk.”

“I'm dazzled myself,” said the marshal. “I've never seen such a match!”

Just then, a mounted messenger galloped up and reported: “More enemy troops at Beiguan Gate!” Shi Bao hastily left the prince.

Wu Song the Pilgrim saw that Sagacious could not defeat the Precious Light, and he feared there might be an accident. Brandishing his pair of swords, he charged. The National Advisor knew he couldn't cope with the two of them. He retreated into the city. Wu Song started to pursue, but out through the gate galloped a ferocious commander. He was Bei Yingkui, one of Prince Fang's generals, and he assailed Wu Song with levelled lance.

They clashed on the drawbridge. Wu Song closed in, cast aside one sword, grasped his opponent's lance and, with a yank, pulled man and weapon from the saddle. Slash went his blade, and Bei's head rolled on the ground, Sagacious Lu moved up with reinforcements.

Prince Fang hurriedly ordered his men to raise the drawbridge, and pulled his troops back into the city. Zhu Tong withdrew the Song forces ten *li* and made camp. He dispatched a messenger to Song Jiang reporting the victory.

That day Song Jiang had led his troops to Beiguan Gate and challenged the foe to battle. Southern general Shi Bao took his Comet Hammer and mounted. Carrying his Wind Splitter sword, he had the city gate opened and rode forth. From the Song army, Big Halberd Guan Sheng cantered out to meet him. More than twenty rounds they fought, then Shi Bao turned his steed and withdrew. Guan Sheng quickly checked his horse and returned to his position.

“Why didn't you pursue?” Song Jiang queried.

“His swordsmanship is in no way inferior to mine,” said the Big Halberd. “When he retreats like that, he must be up to some trick.”

“Duan Kaizeng says the man flings a comet hammer,” Wu Yong interjected. “He rides off, feigning defeat, and lures his adversary deep into enemy territory.”

“If we go after him, he'll play us dirty,” said Song Jiang. “We'll recall our troops and go back to camp.” He dispatched a man with a reward for Wu Song.

Meanwhile, Li Kui marched with his infantry to join Lu Junyi. On a mountain road they ran into Zhang Jian and his defeated soldiers, and fiercely attacked, killing southern general Yao Yi in the course of the wild skirmish. Zhang Jian and Zhang Tao fled towards the pass, but were intercepted by General Lu Junyi. After another big clash, the two southern generals fled along a path into the mountains. Their pursuers were hot on their heels. They had no choice but to abandon their mounts and plunge ahead on foot.

But then, from a bamboo thicket, two men suddenly emerged. Each held a steel pitchfork. Before the southerners could defend themselves, they were knocked flat by the two and hauled down the slope. Their captors were none other than Xie Zhen and Xie Bao.

When General Lu saw the two prisoners he was very pleased. Joining forces with Black Whirlwind Li Kui, he proceeded to the main camp on Mount Gaoting. He told Song Jiang of the deaths of Dong Ping, Zhang Qin and Zhou Tong. Both men were deeply grieved. The other chieftains in Lu's army paid their respects to Song Jiang, and the reunited units made camp.

The next day Song Jiang sent Zhang Jian to the Governor in Suzhou to be executed and his head hung up on display. Zhang Tao was disemboweled in front of the camp and his heart raised towards Heaven in a sacrifice to Dong Ping, Zhang Qin and Zhou Tong.

“I'm going to ask General Lu to go with has contingent to the Deqing County road,” Song Jiang said to Wu Yong, “connect with Huyan Zhuo's column and come back here together, to join in our attack on Hangzhou City.”

Lu accepted the mission, mustered his troops, and marched in the direction of Fengkou Town. Just as they arrived, they ran into the returning defeated forces of Si Xiangfang. A murderous battle ensued. Si fell into the water and drowned. What was left of his soldiers fled. Lu and Huyan combined units and returned to Song Jiang in the camp at Mount Gaoting.

The reassembled chieftains conferred. Now that the two main columns had reached Hangzhou, Song Jiang left control of Xuanzhou, Huzhou and Lone Pine Pass to Governor Zhang and staff officer Cong, who would keep the peace in all captured territory.

He noticed that Lei Heng and Gong Wang were missing from Huyan Zhuo's contingent. Huyan told him what had happened.

“Lei Heng fought Si Xingfang for twenty rounds outside the South Gate of Deqing County Town, and Si hacked him from his steed. Gong battled Huang Ai. Huang drove him into the stream. Horse and rider fell, and the

southern soldiers stabbed him to death with their spears. Suo Chao split southern commander Mi Quan open with his ax. We captured Generals Huang Ai and Xu Bai. We drove Si Xingfang into the water and he drowned. Xue Dounan managed to escape in the confusion of battle. We don't know where he's gone."

Song Jiang's tears fell like rain at the news of the death of Lei Heng and Gong Wang. "Zhang Shun appeared to me in a dream the other day," he said to his chieftains, "and I saw to the right of him several bloodstained figures. I know now that they were the ghosts of Dong Ping, Zhang Qin, Zhou Tong, Lei Heng and Gong Wang. If I can take Hangzhou and Ninghai District, I shall ask the monks to conduct a fine service to ensure the passage of our brothers' souls into Heaven."

He had Huang Ai and Xu Bai delivered to Governor Zhang for execution. Of them we'll say no more.

That day he ordered that cattle and horses be slaughtered and gave a banquet for his army. The next day he and Wu Yong planned the division of their forces for the Hangzhou offensive.

Lu Junyi, with twelve senior and lieutenant commanders, would at tack the Houchao Gate. The twelve commanders were Li Chong, Huyan Zhuo, Liu Tang, Xie Zhen, Xie Bao, Shang Tinggui, Wei Dingguo, Chen Da, Yang Chun, Du Qian, Li Yun and Shi Yong.

Hua Rong would strike Genshan Gate with fourteen senior and lieutenant commanders, who were, apart from Hua Rong himself, Qin Ming, Zhu Wu, Huang Xin, Sun Li, Li Zhong, Zou Yuan, Zou Run, LiLi, Bai Sheng, Tang Long, Mu Chun, Zhu Gui and Zhu Fu.

Supported by ten chieftains, Mu Hong would proceed to the camp in the western hills to help Li Jun assault the gates fronting on the West Lake. The eleven commanders were Li Jun, Ruan the Second, Ruan the Fifth, Meng Kang, Shi Xiu, Fan Rui, Ma Lin, Mu Hong, Yang Xiong, Xue Yong and Ding Desun.

Sun Xin and other seven commanders would go to the camp outside East Gate and assist Zhu Tong in attacking Vegetable Market and Jianqiao gates. The seven chieftains were Zhu Tong, Shi Jin, Sagacious Lu, Wu Song, Mistress Gu, Sun Erniang and Zhang Qing.

From the East Gate camp eight chieftains were chosen who would handle intelligence and logistics. They were Li Ying, Kong Ming, Yang Lin, Du Xing, Tong Meng, Tong Wei, Wang Ying and Hu the Ten Feet of Steel.

Song Jiang himself was to lead twenty-one senior and lieutenant commanders to attack along the road to Beiguan Gate. These commanders were Wu Yong, Guan Sheng, Suo Qiao, Dai Zong, Li Kui, Lu Fang, Guo Sheng, Ou Peng, Deng Fei, Yan Shun, Ling Zhen, Bao Xu, Xiang Chong, Li Gun, Song Qing, Pei Xuan, Jiang Jing, Cai Fu, Cai Qing, Shi Qian and Yu Baosi.

Thus, the gates on all four sides of the city would be assailed.

Song Jiang and his contingent pushed right up to the Beiguan Gate and issued their challenge. Drums and gongs sounded on the walls, the gate was opened, the drawbridge lowered, and Shi Bao rode forth to give battle. Suo Chao the Urgent Vanguard, impetuous as always, galloped out, waving his big ax, and engaged him.

After less than ten rounds, Shi Bao executed a feint and withdrew. Suo Chao, ignoring Guan Sheng's shout of warning, pursued. A flying hammer suddenly struck Suo Chao full in the face, knocking him from his saddle. Deng Fei rushed to the rescue, but Shi Bao's horse got there first. Before Deng could defend himself, Shi Bao, with one sweep of the sword, cut him in two.

At this, the monk Precious Light the National Advisor came charging out of the city with a number of fierce commanders. Song Jiang's unit, badly defeated, retreated north. Hua Rong and Qin Ming slashed into the pursuing southerners from the side and drove them off, then escorted Song Jiang back to camp. The victorious Shi Bao returned to Hangzhou in jubilation.

Song Jiang, in his tent in the Mount Gaoting camp, brooded over the loss of Suo Chao and Deng Fei.

“There are some very tough generals in that city,” Wu Yong said. “We can only take it by guile, not by direct confrontation.”

“We keep losing men. How do you propose to do it?”

“You've already arranged for our army to assault all of the gates. Hit the Beiguan Gate again tomorrow. The foe is sure to come out and fight. We'll pretend to be defeated and lead them far from the city. At the sound of a signal cannon, our other forces will then hit all the gates at once. Whichever one manages to break in will immediately set fires as a signal calling for reinforcements. The enemy soldiers won't know which way to turn, and we'll win a big victory.”

Song Jiang directed Dai Zong to transmit the appropriate orders. On his instructions, Guan Sheng went with a small cavalry troop the next day to Beiguan Gate and challenged the foe. Drums pounded on the walls and Shi Bao again rode forth with a contingent. The southern general engaged Guan Sheng. They had fought less than ten rounds when Guan Sheng hastily retreated. Shi Bao and his soldiers gave chase. Ling Zhen Fired a cannon. At this signal, the Song troops shouted and attacked the city gates in simultaneous drives.

We'll tell first of the assault on Houchao Gate by General Lu Junyi with Lin Chong and the others. As they neared the city they saw that the gate was open and the drawbridge down. Liu Tang, eager to win first honors, galloped straight in, sword in hand. The soldiers on the wall cut the rope and dropped the slab gate. Poor Liu Tang. Both he and his horse were quickly killed in the gateway.

When Hangzhou became the capital in the days of King Qian, he built the city gates in three layers. The outermost was a slab gate, next was a two-leafed set of iron doors, and innermost was a large grill gate. As soon as the slab gate dropped behind him, Liu Tang was attacked by soldiers who had been hiding on both sides. How could he not die?

Lin Chong and Huyan Zhuo went back with their men to headquarters and reported to Lu Junyi. None of the Song troops had succeeded in forcing any of the gates, and all withdrew. A messenger raced with the news to Song Jiang in the main camp. He wept bitterly over the death of Liu Tang.

“Another brother gone! From the day we pledged brotherhood in Yuncheng County and went with Chao Gai into Liangshan Marsh, Liu suffered years of tribulation. He never knew any happiness. But he survived hundreds of battles and engagements and never lost his fighting spirit. Who would have thought he'd die in this place today!”

“That plan was no good,” Wu Yong admitted. “Not only did it fail, but we lost a brother to the bargain. Call our troops back from the gates. We'll think of something else.”

Song Jiang was very upset. He longed for quick vengeance and sighed without end. Black Whirlwind tried to reassure him.

“Don't worry, brother. I'll go out tomorrow with Bao Xu, Xiang Chong and Li Gun. One way or another we'll take that oaf Shi Bao.”

“He's a remarkable hero. You won't even get near him.”

“I don't believe it. If I don't nab him tomorrow, you'll never see me again!”

“Be very careful. He's no pushover.”

Li Kui went to his own tent, poured out a big bowl of wine, piled a platter with sliced beef, and asked Bao Xu, Xiang Chong and Li Gun to join him.

“We four have always fought as a team,” he said. “I just bragged to Big Brother that we were going to capture Shi Bao tomorrow. I don't want any of you holding back.”

“Big Brother is always letting the cavalry take the lead,” said Bao Xu. “We four must vow here and now that we'll show what our infantry can do. When we grab that churl tomorrow we'll be able to hold our heads high.”

The following morning the four ate and drank their fill, took up their weapons and prepared to march. “Watch us slaughter them,” they said.

Song Jiang saw that they were half drunk. “Don't you go throwing your lives away,” he admonished.

“You underestimate us, brother!” Li Kui replied.

“I just hope you keep your word.”

Mounting, Song Jiang rode with cavalry commanders Guan Sheng, Ou Peng, Lu Fang and Guo Sheng to Beiguan Gate. They beat drums, waved banners and challenged combat. The fiery Li Kui planted himself before them, brandishing his axes. Bao Xu, holding a big broad cutlass, glared wildly, waiting only for the carnage to start. Xiang Chong and Li Gun grasped their shields, each fitted with twenty-four throwing knives, and stood on either side with levelled spears.

On the wall, drums thundered and gongs crashed, and Shi Bao rode forth on a melon-yellow steed, carrying his Wind Splitter Sword. He was accompanied by two generals named Wu Zhi and Lian Ming. They advanced to meet their adversaries.

Li Kui was a man who feared neither Heaven nor Earth. With a roar, he and his three companions rushed Shi Bao. They were upon him by the time the Wind Splitter was raised. Li Kui swung his ax and broke the leg of Shi's horse. Shi leaped from the saddle and took refuge among his cavalry.

Bao Xu had already hacked Lian Ming from his steed, and the throwing knives of the two shield-wielders were darting everywhere like jade fish and silver needles. Song Jiang sent his cavalry in a charge up to the walls. They were greeted by a deluge of logs and ballista stones from the ramparts. He hurriedly called them back. He saw Bao Xu plunging through the city gate. Song Jiang could only groan.

Shi Bao was hiding within the gate. When Bao Xu came running in, he dealt him a slanting blow from the side that cut him in two. Xiang Chong and Li Gun quickly covered Li Kui and the three retreated. Song Jiang and

his contingent returned to camp. His gloom deepened over the death of Bao Xu. Li Kui also wept.

“This plan was no good either,” said Wu Yong. “Although we killed one of their generals, we've lost Li Kui's right-hand man.”

Everyone was very depressed. Just then the Xie brothers returned with a report. Song Jiang directed that they speak in detail.

“I scouted with Xie Bao twenty or so *li* from Hangzhou's South Gate to a place called Fan Village,” said Xie Zhen. “We saw moored along the river bank a line of several dozen boats, and went down for a look. It turned out that they were a convoy of grain vessels commanded by an administrator named Yuan from Fuyang County. We were going to kill him, but he cried and said: 'We're all good citizens of the Great Song Empire, but Fang La is crushing us with levies. If any man refuses to pay, he and his whole family are slaughtered. We've heard that the imperial soldiers have come to remove the blight. We want nothing more than to see peace again. We're sick of all this suffering!'”

“He obviously was honest, so we didn't kill him. We asked: 'What are you doing here?' He said: 'The counties received an order from Prince Fang Tianding to clean out the reserves of all the villages and hand over fifty thousand bushels of white rice. I was put in charge, and was on my way to turn over what's been collected so far—five thousand bushels. Because your great army has surrounded the city and there's fighting, we haven't dared go any closer, and are laying over here temporarily.' That's the whole story, General. We've returned specially to let you know.”

Wu Yong was delighted. He said: “This is a Heaven-sent chance. Those grain vessels will serve us well.” And he requested Song Jiang to issue the following order: “Let the Xie brothers lead a group of fifteen chieftains, disguised as boatmen and their wives. They are not to say a word, but mix with the crews and sail with them into the city. Once there, let Ling Zhen fire a volley of cannon shots. That will be our signal to move up troops as reinforcements.”

The Xie brothers called Administrator Yuan ashore and informed him of Song Jiang's instructions. “As good Song Dynasty citizens you must carry them out,” they said. “After it's over, you'll be handsomely rewarded.”

Yuan had no choice but to comply. Many army officers boarded the craft and took over as boatmen. The original boatmen were put to other tasks. Wang Ying, Sun Xin and Zhang Qing changed clothes with three of them, and their wives Ten Feet of Steel, Mistress Gu and Sun the Witch disguised themselves as boatwomen. Junior officers manned the sweep oars. Weapons were hidden in the holds. The boats then sailed to the banks outside the city.

The Song forces were not far from Hangzhou's gates. Administrator Yuan went ashore, followed by Xie Zhen, Xie Bao and many of the boatmen. They walked up to the gate and demanded entry. Soldiers on the wall queried them, then informed the palace. Prince Fang Tianding sent Wu Zhi, who went out, counted the vessels, returned and reported. Fang ordered six generals to go forth with ten thousand soldiers and guard the northeast approaches while Yuan sailed in with his convoy. The chieftains and their wives, mingled with the crews, went in together. The five thousand bushels of grain were soon unloaded, and the six southern generals marched back into the city with their troops.

Song Jiang's forces again ringed Hangzhou at a distance of only two or three *li* and spread out in battle deployment. At the second watch, Ling Zhen went with nine cases of Mother and Sons small cannons to the top of Wushan Hill and set them off. The chieftains lit torches and started blazes in many parts of the city. All Hangzhou was thrown into confusion. They had no idea how many Song troops had entered the city.

Prince Fang in his palace was shocked. He hastily donned his armor and mounted. But by then the soldiers on the walls above the gates had fled from their posts. The Song units launched a massive offensive, all eager to gain glory in capturing the city.

Meanwhile in the hills to the west Li Jun, on receiving his orders, led his unit rapidly to Pure Benevolence Cove, obtained boats, and crossed West Lake. They landed near Yongjin Gate and began seizing each of the water

gates. Li Jun and Shi Xiu started by climbing over the wall. In the darkness of night they engaged in mixed fracases.

Only South Gate was unbesieged. Through this the defeated southern army fled. Prince Fang, on his horse, couldn't find a single officer. Scurrying like a cur whose master has died, frantic as a fish dodging the net, he left Hangzhou accompanied by only a few infantrymen.

At the foot of Five Clouds Hill, they saw a man, buff naked, emerge from the river, a knife in his teeth, and leap upon the bank. Frightened by this fierce apparition, Prince Fang struck his mount and tried to flee. But no matter how he flailed, the animal refused to budge. It was as if someone was grasping its bridle.

The man ran up, pulled Fang from the saddle and cut off his head with a single sweep of the knife. The head in one hand, the knife in the other, the man then mounted Fang's horse and galloped towards Hangzhou.

Lin Chong and Huyan Zhuo encountered him just as they reached Six Harmonies Pagoda with their troops. They recognized him in astonishment as Zhang Heng the Boat Flame. “Where are you coming from, brother?” Huyan called. Zhang Heng didn't reply, but continued racing towards the city.

Song Jiang and his main force had already entered Hangzhou. He made Prince Fang's palace his headquarters. The chieftains in occupation were startled to see Zhang Heng galloping up. He rode directly to Song Jiang, rolled from the saddle, flung the head and the knife on the ground, kowtowed twice, and burst into tears. Song Jiang embraced him.

“Brother, where have you come from? And where is Ruan the Seventh?”

“I'm not Zhang Heng.”

“If you're not Zhang Heng, who are you?”

“I'm Zhang Shun. Because I was killed by spears and arrows in the channel outside Yongjin Gate, a trace of my spirit refused to leave and floated on the

water. This moved the Marsh-Shaking Dragon King residing in West Lake. He made me Lord of Jinhua and kept me on in his underwater Dragon Palace as a spirit noble. When you were breaking into Hangzhou today, brother, I dogged the footsteps of Prince Fang and, in the middle of the night, followed him out of the city. I saw brother Zhang Heng on the river, borrowed his body, flew up the bank, hastened to the foot of Five Clouds Hill, killed that scoundrel and hurried back to see you!”

He fainted dead away. Song Jiang raised him up. Zhang Heng opened his eyes. He saw Song Jiang and the chieftains, the bristling swords, the crowds of soldiers.

“Is it in the Nether Regions that I'm seeing you, brother?” he asked.

Song Jiang wept. “You loaned brother Zhang Shun your body and he killed the rogue Prince Fang. You're not dead. We're all very much alive. You're fine.”

“That means, then, that my brother is dead!”

“Zhang Shun tried to swim under a water gate on West Lake and get into the city and set fires. But he was discovered and killed outside the gate by spears and arrows.”

Zhang Heng wept bitterly. “Brother!” he cried, and collapsed to the ground, unconscious. His limbs were rigid, his eyes closed. His seven souls and three spirits hung in the balance.

Truly, if he hadn't gone with the King of Hell's commanding general, he surely would have been called by Hell's Summoner.

What was the outcome for Zhang Heng, crushed by distress? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 96
Lu Junyi Assails the Shezhou Road
Song Jiang Battles on Black Dragon Ridge

At last Zhang Heng was revived.

“Help him into a tent,” said Song Jiang, “and give him medical treatment. Ask him what happened along the coast.”

He instructed Pei Xuan and Jiang Jing to record the valorous deeds of the chieftains in the recent fighting. By then it was morning, and all had gathered in the camp. Li Jun and Shi Xiu had captured southern general Wu Zhi; the three women chieftains had caught Zhang Daoyuan; Lin Chong, with his long serpent lance, had run Leng Gong through; and the Xie brothers had killed Cui Yu. Only five of the southern commanders had escaped.

Song Jiang issued a proclamation reassuring the populace and rewarded his troops. Zhang Daoyuan was sent to Governor Zhang for execution. In a written dispatch, Song Jiang recommended that Administrator Yuan, who had contributed his grain, be appointed magistrate of Fuyang County. The governor issued a certificate of office with the name left blank. Of that we'll say no more.

The chieftains rested in the city. An aide reported: “Ruan the Seventh is here. He's come by way of the river.” Song Jiang summoned him to his tent and questioned him. Seventh told his story.

“I set out with Zhang Heng, Hou Jian and Duan Jingzhu and our men, and along the coast we found boats. We sailed off Haiyan, intending to go inland up the Qiantang River. But the winds and tides were against us and we were driven out to sea. When we tried to get back, the gale capsized us, throwing everyone in the water. Hou Jian and Duan Jingzhu couldn't swim and were drowned. Most of the sailors managed to survive, but scattered in all directions. I swam to Haikou and got as far as Ochre Hill Gate, when the tide swept me to Banfan Hill, and I swam ashore there. I saw brother Zhang Heng in the river off Five Clouds Hill. I waited for him to come up the bank, but then he disappeared again. Last night I saw the light of the fires here in Hangzhou, and I heard the cannon. I figured you must be fighting in the city, so I swam here up the river. Has brother Zhang Heng come ashore yet?”

Song Jiang told him about Zhang Heng, then had him rejoin his brothers. He instructed the three Ruans to resume their duties as naval commanders. He also ordered all naval chieftains to gather their boats on the river and get ready to sail against Muzhou.

Because the spirit of Zhang Shun had appeared in human form, he built a temple to him on the banks of West Lake outside Yongjin Gate, calling it Lord of Jinhua and sacrificing there. Later, after defeating Fang La and earning honors, Song Jiang returned to the capital and reported Zhang Shun's feat. The emperor bestowed the posthumous title of General of Jinhua. The temple to Zhang Shun's memory has remained in Hangzhou.

Song Jiang was deeply saddened by the loss of so many chieftains since crossing the Yangzi. In the Pure Benevolence Monastery he had prayer services conducted for seven days and seven nights, dispensed charity, sacrificed to the spirits of the departed, prayed for their smooth passage into Heaven, and set up memorial tablets. After these good deeds were done, he destroyed all of Prince Fang's paraphernalia of rank and office and distributed his valuables among the Song army officers.

Peace was restored to Hangzhou, and the people feasted in celebration. Song Jiang conferred with Military Advisor Wu Yong on a long-range plan for the offensive against Muzhou.

It was by then the end of the fourth lunar month. Suddenly, the report came in: “Deputy District Commander Liu Guangshi has arrived with an emissary from the capital.” Song Jiang and his chieftains met them outside Beiguan Gate and welcomed them into the city. At headquarters the imperial decree was read.

Vanguard General Song Jiang: You have attained great merit in the war to wipe out Fang La. We bestow thirty-five bottles of imperial wine and thirty-five sets of silk clothing as rewards to your senior commanders. To the lieutenant commanders we bestow bolts of satin.

The monarch only knew that Gongsun Sheng had not crossed the river with them, but not that they had suffered heavy casualties.

At the sight of the thirty-five sets of clothes and thirty five bottles of imperial wine Song Jiang's heart was stricken, and tears flowed from his eyes. The emissary asked him what was wrong. Song told him of the loss of the chieftains.

“The emperor hasn't heard,” cried the emissary. “I shall certainly tell him when I get back.”

Song Jiang gave a banquet for the emissary and Liu, attended by all the remaining chieftains, big and small. They drank the imperial wine and expressed thanks to the monarch for his kindness. The wine and clothing intended for the chieftains who had died were kept.

The following day Song Jiang took one bottle and one set of clothes to Zhang Shun's temple. He called his name and sacrificed the wine to him. The clothing he draped on a clay idol. The rest of the clothes he burned in sacrifice to the other departed chieftains.

The emissary stayed a few days, then returned to the capital. Song Jiang saw him off.

Ten or so days quickly passed. Governor Zhang sent a dispatch urging Song Jiang to begin his offensive. Song and Wu Yong invited Lu Junyi to a conference.

“To get to Muzhou, we go directly along the river,” said Song Jiang. “To reach Shezhou, we must follow the small road through Yuling Pass. That means we'll have to divide our forces and hit two objectives. Which one would you prefer, brother?”

“The soldier obeys his general. Whatever you order, brother. I wouldn't presume to choose.”

“Let's leave it to Heaven's will, then.”

Song Jiang decided on the number of men for each column, wrote out two lots, burned incense and prayed for guidance. The two leaders then drew. Song Jiang picked Muzhou, Lu's slip read “Shezhou.”

“Fang La's lair is in Bangyuan Cavern in Clear Stream County,” said Song. “After you've taken Shezhou, brother, camp there and notify me immediately. We'll fix a date to drive on Bangyuan Cavern together.” At Lu's request, Song allocated the chieftains. Thirty-six would accompany Song Jiang in his offensive against Muzhou and Black Dragon Ridge. They were the military advisor Wu Yong, Guan Sheng, Hua Rong, Qin Ming, Li Ying, Dai Zong, Zhu Tong, Li Kui, Sagacious Lu, Wu Song, Xie Zhen, Xie Bao, Lu Fang, Guo Sheng, Fan Rui, Ma Lin, Yan Shun, Song Qing, Xiang Chong, Li Gun, Wang Ying, Hu Sanniang, Ling Zhen, Du Xing, Cai Fu, Cai Qing, Pei Xuan, Jiang Jing and Yu Baosi. Seven senior and lieutenant naval chieftains would command the naval vessels going with the army to Muzhou. They were Li Jun, Ruan the Second, Ruan the Fifth, Ruan the Seventh, Tong Wei, Tong Meng and Meng Kang.

Twenty-eight commanders would support Lu Junyi in his assault on Shezhou and Yuling Pass. They were military advisor Zhu Wu, Lin Chong, Huyan Zhuo, Shi Jin, Yang Xiong, Shi Xiu, Shan Tinggui, Wei Dingguo, Sun Li, Huang Xin, Ou Peng, Du Qian, Chen Da, Yang Chun, Li Zhong, Xue Yong, Zou Yuan, Zou Run, LiLi, Li Yun, Tang Long, Shi Yong, Shi Qian, Ding Desun, Sun Xin, Mistress Gu, Zhang Qing and Sun the Witch. He would have an army of thirty thousand.

Lu departed on the appointed date after bidding farewell to Song Jiang and Deputy District Commander Liu. He and his troops wound through hill country, skirting Linan County.

Song Jiang prepared his boats, Organized his infantry and cavalry and assigned his commanders, on the day selected he dedicated his banners at a sacrificial ceremony, then set forth on land and water, war vessels and horsemen moving in coordination. A plague was rampaging in Hangzhou and six of the chieftains were ill and couldn't march. Two others were looking after them, making a total of eight who had to be left behind. The remaining thirty-seven headed for Muzhou with Song Jiang, following along the river first in the direction of Fuyang County.

We'll talk now of Chai Jin and Yan Qing who had departed from Song Jiang at Xiuzhou. From there they had proceeded to Haiyan County, gone by boat from the seacoast to a point past Yuezhou, then followed a winding road overland to Zhuji County, forded the Yupu and travelled to the border of Muzhou Prefecture. The officer guarding the pass stopped them.

“I am a scholar from the Central Plain,” Chai Jin told him. “I know astrology and geomancy, I understand *yin* and *yang*, the wind and clouds, the Three Astral Glows, the Nine Schools and the Three Religions. There's nothing in which I'm not versed. I've come because I've seen from afar emanations of a new emperor emerging south of the Yangzi. Why do you block my virtuous path?”

Impressed by Chai Jin's high-flown language, the officer asked him his name.

“I am called Ke Yin, and I come alone, except for a single servant, to offer my services to your exalted country. I have no other purpose.”

The officer kept Chai Jin at the pass and dispatched a messenger with the news to Muzhou. He reported to Deputy Prime Minister Zu Shiyuan. Advisor Shen Shou, Royal Inspector Huan Yi and Grand Marshal Tan Gao. They had Chai Jin brought before them and greeted him kindly. They were very interested in what he had to say. Since he had such a fine appearance, they were not in the least suspicious.

The prime minister directed the royal inspector to take Chai Jin to the palace in Clear Stream to meet the king. At that time Fang La had palaces both in Muzhou and Shezhou prefectures. The main palace housed the highest civil and military offices. The palace in Bangyuan Cavern in Clear Stream County was also such a headquarters.

Chai Jin and Yan Qing went with Huan Yi to Clear Stream where they were first introduced to Lou Minzhong the prime minister. Chai Jin held forth in elegant language which pleased Lou very much. He insisted on entertaining Chai Jin in his chancellery. He admired Chai Jin's intellectual attainments

and propriety. Lou originally had been a teacher in Clear Stream County. Although he had some learning, it wasn't very high. Chai Jin's manner of speaking delighted him.

The following morning they waited in the palace for Fang La to hold court. In the throne room royal concubines and beautiful serving maids were arrayed in attendance. Outside in ranks were high civil and military officials, and before the palace stood the royal guards with their golden melon emblems. The prime minister then addressed the throne.

“I would like to present a worthy gentleman named Ke Yin from the Central Plain, the land of Confucius. Thoroughly conversant with the civil and military arts, he is both learned and courageous. He knows astrology and geomancy, understands the winds and clouds, can read the signs of Heaven and Earth, is expert in the Three Religions and Nine Schools. All philosophies are to him an open book. He has been drawn here by emanations of an imperial emergence. He is now outside the gate awaiting Your Majesty's summons.”

“Let the worthy gentleman enter,” said Fang La. “He may wear ordinary dress.”

Chai Jin was called into the palace. He kowtowed, fervently wished the king long life, then was led before the throne. Fang La was favorably impressed by Chai Jin's noble mien.

“Where are these imperial emanations you've seen, sir?” he asked.

“I am from the kingdom of the Central Plain, Sire. Both of my parents are dead. I am my own sole support, and I live by the occult learning handed down from the ancient sages. Recently the Imperial Star has been very bright, casting its light directly on the eastern part of your Wu region. I therefore had no hesitation to make the long arduous journey. Here, south of the Yangzi I have again seen the five-hued imperial glow, and find that it rises from Muzhou. Today I am privileged to view Your Majesty's holy visage, your imperial carriage, your face like the sun—all manifestations of that glow. I am indeed the most fortunate of men!” Again Chai Jin kowtowed.

“Although I possess a kingdom here in the southeast, my cities have been invaded and captured by Song Jiang's forces.” said Fang La. “Now they are heading this way. What should I do?”

“The ancients had a saying: 'Easily obtained, easily lost; arduously obtained, strongly held.' After Your Majesty established your kingdom here in the southeast you conquered many prefectures. Although Song Jiang has invaded some of them, good fortune will soon return to this sacred land. Not only will Your Majesty's territory south of the Yangzi be secure, but in days to come your reign will extend to the Central Plain, restoring the Golden Age of Antiquity, exceeding the past glories of Han and Tang.”

Overjoyed, Fang La directed that Chai Jin be seated on a satin cushion. He feted him at a royal banquet and gave him the title of Royal Secretary.

From that day forward, Chai Jin was very close to Fang La, and he deliberately cajoled and flattered him. In less than half a month every official inside and outside the palace was strongly attached to Chai Jin.

Chai Jin's fairness in everything he did before long won him still greater favor in the eyes of the king. Instructing the deputy prime minister to act as intermediary, Fang La gave his daughter the Princess Jinzhi to Chai Jin in marriage, and bestowed on him the title of Duke Consort. Yan Qing, who called himself Yun Bi, was made a royal attendant, and became known as Attendant Yun.

After his marriage to the princess, Chai Jin could go anywhere he pleased in the palace, and he knew all the inside stories. Fang La also consulted him on important military matters.

“Your aura is correct, Sire,” Chai Jin often said to him. “It's just that you are being assaulted by certain stars. You'll have no peace for the next half-year. But when Song Jiang is depleted of generals, those stars will retreat and your reign will be restored. You'll roll up the foe far and wide, and you'll control the Central Plain.”

“Song Jiang has killed many of my best-loved generals,” said Fang La. “What can I do about that?”

“I have examined the night sky. The signs for Your Majesty show that although you have dozens of generals, they are not righteous and soon will perish. But Twenty-eight stars will come to replace them and restore your reign. Moreover, a dozen or more of Song Jiang's generals will surrender and join you. They too are stars in your destiny, and will be your loyal officials aiding you to expand your borders.”

To Fang La these were happy tidings.

Meanwhile, Song Jiang's army, having left Hangzhou, advanced on land and water towards Fuyang County. Deng Yuanjue, the Southerners' National Advisor, with four generals, was holding the pass with remnants of their defeated forces, and sent an urgent plea to Muzhou for support. Deputy Prime Minister Zu dispatched ten thousand troops under two of his most trusted commanders. One was called Bai Qin, the other Jiang De, and both were men of boundless valor. When they reached Fuyang County, they joined forces with National Advisor Deng and, together, occupied the mountain top.

Song Jiang's expedition had already reached Seven *Li* Bay, and pushed on, with the navy leading the cavalry. Learning of this, southern general Shi Bao rode down from the summit with his Comet Hammer and Wind Splitter Sword and headed for the foe. Guan Sheng was about to go forth when Lu Fang stopped him with a shout.

“Wait a bit, brother. Watch me fight a few rounds with the lout!”

While Song Jiang observed from the shadows of the arch of pennants, Lu Fang cantered towards Shi Bao, crescent-bladed halberd in hand. The southern general, grasping his Wind Splitter Sword, met him on the field of combat. They battled fifty rounds and Lu Fang began to weaken. Guo Sheng, also wielding a crescent-bladed halberd, galloped to his assistance. Fighting two against one, Shi Bao never faltered.

It was at this moment that the National Advisor sounded the retreat. He saw from the mountain top that Song Jiang's fleet, sailing the river on a

favorable wind, had reached the shore and the men were already landing. Afraid of being caught in a pincers, he ordered a withdrawal.

But Lu Fang and Guo Sheng had no intention of letting Shi Bao escape. After they had fought another four or five rounds, Zhu Tong rode out from the Song Jiang position. Shi Bao couldn't handle three against one. He knocked their weapons aside and fled.

Song Jiang pointed with his whip, and his army charged the ridge. The southerners were unable to withstand them. They pulled back into Tonglu County. Pressing forward through the night, the Song army crossed White Hornet Ridge and made camp. At the same time the Xie brothers, Yan Shun, Stumpy Tiger and Ten Feet of Steel were sent to secure the east road, while Li Kui, Xiang Chong, Li Gun, Fan Rui and Ma Lin were directed to seize the west road. Each contingent commanded a thousand infantry, and their orders were to march on Tonglu County and capture the enemy installation. The armada was to continue its advance upon the river, captained by Li Jun, the three Ruan brothers, the two Tong brothers and Meng Kang.

By the time Xie Zhen and his contingent reached Tonglu County it was nearly midnight. The National Advisor was conferring with Shi Bao when suddenly they heard cannon fire. The southerners hastily mounted.

They saw the torches of three columns approaching at a rapid clip. Shi Bao fled, and the others hurriedly followed. None of them dared stand and fight.

Now the columns were upon them. Southern general Wen, who had been a little slow in getting on his horse, raced along a small path, only to be confronted by Stumpy Tiger and Ten Feet of Steel. The husband and wife team dragged him from his saddle and took him captive. Black Whirlwind Li Kui and his unit slaughtered and set fires. Song Jiang ordered the rest of his troops to break camp and move into the county town of Tonglu. There, Stumpy Tiger and Ten Feet of Steel presented their prisoner Wen Kerang and claimed their reward. Song Jiang directed that the southern general be sent to Governor Zhang for execution. Of that we'll say no more.

The next day Song Jiang moved both his land and naval units up to the foot of Black Dragon Ridge. Beyond the ridge was Muzhou. The National Advisor and his southern generals occupied the pass and stationed their troops all around. Because it was near the Yangzi, the pass was flanked by swift waters on one side and steep cliffs on the other, with fortifications above and a naval fleet below.

After making camp and building palisades, Song Jiang directed Li Kui and his contingent to go out with five hundred shield-bearers and scout the paths. But at the base of the ridge they were greeted by a shower of logs and rocks from above and had to return. Song Jiang then called half the fleet ashore and instructed Ruan the Second to take two assistants and a thousand sailors in a hundred boats and row, beating drums and singing folk songs, to a point near Black Dragon Ridge.

Fang La had a naval base there with five hundred vessels of war and five thousand sailors. They were commanded by four admirals known as the Four Dragons of Zhejiang. The top-ranking admiral was Cheng Gui the Jade-Clawed Dragon. His lieutenants were Zhai Yuan the Satin-Scaled Dragon, Qiao Zheng the Wave-Breasting Dragon, and Xie Fu the Pearl-Playing Dragon. Fang La himself had given them these names. The four originally were boatmen on the Qiantang River. After they joined him, he made them officials of the third degree.

Ruan the Second and his craft, travelling with the swift current, rowed to the shore. The four admirals in the naval base were already informed. They had prepared fifty fire rafts. Built of large pine logs they were piled high with hay under which incendiary fuses were concealed, and lashed together by strips of bamboo. The rafts lay waiting on the beach. As Ruan the Second, Meng Kang and the Tong brothers neared the shore, the four admirals watched for a while, then each waved a pale red signal flag and shoved off in four fast boats. They were dressed in ordinary garb.

The boats drew close quickly. Ruan the Second shouted an order, and his sailors loosed a volley of arrows. The fast boats withdrew. Yuan chased them towards the shore. The four admirals leaped upon the bank and ran, followed by many of their sailors. Ruan saw the naval base further up the

beach and did not venture to approach. He and his men returned to their vessels.

Suddenly, a banner waved on Black Dragon Ridge and gongs and drums thundered. The fire rafts were ignited and pushed down into the river, where they advanced rapidly with the wind. Behind the raiding party large boats loomed up. The southern sailors on them yelled. All were equipped with long spears and grappling hooks, and they closed in, thrusting and killing.

The Tong brothers saw that the enemy was too strong. They beached their craft, crawled to the mountainside, then began climbing, seeking a path that would bring them back to their camp.

Ruan the Second and Meng Kang were left to confront the foe, alone. The fire rafts floated nearer. Ruan was about to jump into the water when a southern craft glided up behind and a grappling hook snaked out and nabbed him. Afraid that he would be humiliated if captured, Ruan the Second cut his own throat and died.

Meng Kang also started to dive into the river. Cannons on the fire rafts all fired together. A projectile from one of them crushed his helmet and pulverized his skull.

The four admirals advanced rapidly on fire-spewing vessels. Li Jun, Ruan the Fifth and Ruan the Seventh were in the rear of the raiding party fleet. When they saw that their forward craft were defeated, and that the foe was moving towards them fiercely along the bank, they hastily turned their boats and retreated with the current. Abandoning their attempt to land, they returned to Tonglu.

On Black Dragon Ridge, National Advisor Deng and Marshal Shi Bao followed up the victory of their fleet by sweeping down the mountain. But the water was too deep and the distances from their bases too far for the contending forces to maneuver freely. The Song raiders went back to their Tonglu camp, and the southerners withdrew again to Black Dragon Ridge.

Song Jiang brooded in his tent in Tonglu over the death of Ruan the Second and Meng Kang. He ate and slept badly. Wu Yong and the chieftains could

not console him. Ruan the Fifth and Ruan the Seventh, who wore mourning, finally came and spoke to him.

“Our brother gave his life for his country,” they said. “That was a lot better than dying in disgrace in Liangshan Marsh. You're our Commander-in-Chief. You mustn't distress yourself. Concentrate on important national affairs. We two will get our own revenge.”

On hearing this, Song Jiang cheered up a bit. The following day he mustered his troops and prepared to set forth once more. Wu Yong advised against it.

“Don't be impatient, brother. We must work out a good plan, first. Then it will be time enough to cross the ridge.”

Xie Zhen and Xie Bao said: “We brothers were hunters, originally. We're well accustomed to climbing mountains and crossing ridges. Why don't we dress as hunters again, go up the mountain and set a big fire? That will throw a scare into those southern rogues. They'll abandon the pass and run.”

“A good idea,” said Wu Yong. “But that mountain's a dangerous place. It will be very hard to get up there. One slip and you may lose your lives.”

“Since escaping from prison in Dengzhou and joining the band in Liangshan Marsh, thanks to Big Brother's fortunate aura we've enjoyed many years as gallant men. And now the government has pardoned us and we can wear silken clothes. If for the sake of the imperial court and to repay Big Brother we're smashed to bits, it won't be too much for us to give.”

“Don't speak such unlucky words,” Song Jiang cried. “I only hope we can win a great victory and return to the capital. The emperor will see to it that we're properly rewarded. You two must do your utmost for our country.”

The Xie brothers went to prepare. They put on their tiger skin tunics, hung sharp knives at their waists, and took up their steel pitchforks. Bidding Song Jiang farewell, they set out along a path in the direction of Black Dragon Ridge.

It was only about the first watch. They met two junior officers lying in ambush along the road and killed them both. By the time they reached the foot of the ridge it was the second watch. They could hear the watchman's drum striking the hour in the southerners' fort above.

Travel on an open path would have been too dangerous. The Xie brothers ascended the steep side of the mountain, grasping vines and shrubs and hauling themselves laboriously upwards. The moonlight was as bright as day. When they had completed two-thirds of their climb they could see lamps glimmering on the ridge top. They hid themselves in a hollow and listened. The watchman's drum sounded the fourth watch.

“The night is short. It won't be dark much longer,” Xie Zhen whispered to his brother. “Let's go on.”

They resumed their arduous ascent. Soon they reached a sheer cliff face which required all their attention and the full use of their hands and legs. For this reason, they tied their steel pitchforks to their backs. One of these, caught by a vine, clanged loudly against a rock. Sentries on the top spotted them.

Xie Zhen, who was just crawling into a declivity, heard a voice above shout: “Got you!” A hooked pole reached down and tangled itself in his hair. Zhen hastily reached for his knife. The man above tugged. In an instant, Zhen was dangling free in the air. Panic-stricken, he swung his blade, snapping the pole in two. Poor Xie Zhen, a gallant half his life, plunged from the high cliff a hundred and ten feet to his death, smashed on the jagged rocks below!

Seeing his brother fall, Xie Bao began to climb down hurriedly. He was deluged by shower of rocks, large and small. Crossbow darts bit into him from a bamboo thicket. Poor Xie Bao, a hunter all his life, joined his brother in death near a bamboo grove on the side of Black Dragon Ridge!

At daybreak men were sent down to fetch their bodies. They were left exposed to the elements on the ridge.

A scout reported the news to Song Jiang. He wept so bitterly he fainted several times. He ordered Guan Sheng and Hua Rong to muster soldiers at once, capture Black Dragon Ridge and the pass, and avenge the four chieftains.

“Don't be impatient, brother,” Wu Yong cautioned. “They died because it was Heaven's will. Rash actions won't win the pass. We need to work out clever strategy and shrewd tactics. Only then can we deploy troops.”

“Already a third of my brothers are gone,” Song Jiang cried angrily. “I can't permit those wretches to leave those bodies out in the open. We've got to bring them back, tonight, and give them a proper burial, in coffins!”

“The rascals are leaving them there like that with a purpose. You mustn't be rash, brother.”

But Song Jiang refused to listen. He mustered three thousand crack fighters, designated Guan Sheng, Hua Rong, Lu Fang and Guo Sheng as his lieutenants, and arrived at Black Dragon Ridge that very night.

Around the second watch a young officer said: “Can those be the bodies of Xie Zhen and Xie Bao there ahead?”

Song Jiang rode up for a look. Suspended from bamboo poles on two trees were two corpses. A piece of bark had been stripped from one of the trees and on the exposed white of the trunk some words had been written. But they couldn't be distinguished in the dark of the moon. Song Jiang called for a glowing punk used to ignite cannon fuses. Blowing on it, he lit a lantern. He read the inscription: Sooner or later Song Jiang shall end like this.

Furious, he ordered the bodies removed from the trees. Suddenly, on four sides torches glowed, drums thundered, and southern troops closed in. Arrows zinged down from above. Warships in the river were landing men on the bank.

Song Jiang could only groan, completely at a loss. Hastily he retreated, but Shi Bao was blocking his path. He turned, only to find Deng Yuanjue charging his flank. Poor Song Jiang, he'd always been chivalrous, his

nobility was as lofty as the eternal sky. Now disaster and death without burial stared him in the face.

Truly, slaughter on a huge scale impended, the situation was fraught with danger.

How did Song Jiang and his forces extricate themselves? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 97
At Muzhou an Arrow Strikes Deng Yuanjue
On Black Dragon Ridge a Spirit Assists Song Jiang

In a stentorian voice Shi Bao shouted: “Song Jiang dismount and surrender! What are you waiting for?”

This greatly angered Guan Sheng. He clapped his horse and charged Shi Bao, brandishing his halberd. But before they could clash, shouts arose in the rear. The four admirals had mounted the bank and now came tearing forward, in conjunction with southern commanders Wang Ji and Chao Zhong who rushed down from the ridge.

To halt this assault, Hua Rong hurriedly engaged Wang Ji. They fought several rounds and Hua Rong retreated, pursued by Wang and Chao. Hua quickly shot two arrows in succession and brought both of them down. The Song forces cheered but dared not advance. Instead, they withdrew.

The quick disposal of Wang and Chao halted the admirals in their tracks. Hua Rong had stemmed the rear assault successfully. But suddenly two more southern units moved up on the Song flank. One was led by Bai Qin, the other by Jing De. Lu Fang and Guo Sheng rode out and engaged them. The four battled fiercely in a fight to the death.

Song Jiang was very worried. But just then yells rang out behind the southern forces, and they broke and ran. Li Kui and the shield bearer Chieftains Xiang Chong and Li Gun and a thousand infantry had smashed into Shi Bao's rear. When National Advisor Deng rushed reinforcements, his own rear was assaulted by Sagacious Lu and Wu Song, their blades

hacking and cleaving, the pure iron staff pulverizing all in its path. With them were a thousand foot soldiers. And behind these were eight more chieftains leading a charge of mixed infantry and cavalry. From all sides the Song troops ripped into the contingents of Shi Bao and Deng Yuanjue. After rescuing Song Jiang they escorted him back to Tonglu. Shi Bao withdrew his forces up the ridge. In the camp Song Jiang thanked his chieftains.

“If you brothers hadn't come to my aid, I would have joined Xie Zhen and Xie Bao as ghosts in the Nether Regions!”

“You went despite my advice,” Wu Yong reminded him. “I was afraid there would be some mishap, so I sent our chieftains to relieve you.”

Song Jiang was profuse in expressions of gratitude.

On Black Dragon Ridge, Shi Bao and National Advisor Deng conferred in their camp. Shi said: “Song's forces are back in Tonglu at the moment. But if they sneak around the rear of the mountain, Muzhou will be in imminent danger. I wish you'd see the king in his palace in Clear Stream, National Advisor, and request him to send us reinforcements. Then we can hold out for a long time.”

“You're absolutely right, Marshal,” said Deng. “I'll go at once.”

He mounted and rode to Muzhou, where he called on the prime minister Zu Shiyuan and said: “Song Jiang's army is strong. It can't be stopped. If they come rolling towards the pass, we'll be in trouble. I've come to request the king for reinforcements.”

Zu rode with Deng from Muzhou to Bangyuan Cavern in the county of Clear Stream. There, they saw Lou Minzhong the prime minister and told him of their intention to petition for more troops.

Fang La the king held court the next morning. The prime minister, his deputy, and National Advisor Deng attended. They kowtowed, and Deng came forward and hailed the sovereign respectfully.

“This humble monk, on receiving your royal orders, went with the prince to hold Hangzhou. Song Jiang attacked with strong troops and brave generals. We had great difficulty in withstanding them. Then Administrator Yuan slipped them in on his grain boats and we lost the city. The prince was eager for battle, and he died in the fray. Marshal Shi Bao and I retreated to Black Dragon Ridge, where we are guarding the pass. Recently we've killed four of Song Jiang's generals, and he's rather shaken. He's camped now in Tonglu, but sooner or later he'll sneak along some path into the pass. It will be very hard for us to hold the ridge. We earnestly beg Your Majesty to give us more crack forces so that we may defend the pass, drive back the brigands and regain our cities. This humble monk has come specially to submit this petition.”

“We've already allocated all the troops we can spare to our critical points,” said Fang La. “We've just sent tens of thousands to the pass at Yuling, another place where the situation is tight. All we have left are the Royal Guards who protect my palace. I can't very well let them go.”

“If you don't give us reinforcements, Sire, there's nothing I can do,” Deng said. “There will be no way to defend Muzhou if Song Jiang crosses the ridge!”

Prime Minister Lou added his plea: “Black Dragon Ridge is vital. There are thirty thousand Royal Guards. Give the National Advisor ten thousand. I beg Your Majesty to consider.”

But Fang La was adamant. He refused to send any of the Royal Guards to the aid of Black Dragon Ridge.

Royal court ended and the participants left the palace. Lou conferred with the officials. It was decided that Deputy Prime Minister Zu would dispatch a general and five thousand troops as reinforcements. Deng and. Zu returned to Muzhou together and selected a crack force of five thousand and a top-ranking general—Xiahou Cheng. Deng went back with these to the ridge, where he told Shi Bao what had transpired.

“Since the king won't give us any of his Royal Guards to repel the invaders, we can only hold the pass, but not go out and give battle,” said the marshal.

“The four admirals must firmly secure the river banks. If enemy vessels come, they can drive them back. They cannot take any offensive action.”

Meanwhile, because his losses in chieftains were heavy, Song Jiang remained camped in Tonglu. For more than twenty days his soldiers did not venture forth. Then a mounted scout arrived with a report.

“Chancellor of Military Affairs Tong has arrived in Hangzhou with rewards from the emperor. He has sent General Wang Bing with rewards also to General Lu's army at Yuling Pass. Chancellor Tong will soon be here to make the presentation.”

Song Jiang hastened with Wu Yong and the chieftains twenty *li* outside the town to greet him. When they were back in the county government center, the imperial decree was opened and read, and the gifts distributed among the chieftains. Song Jiang and the others paid their respects to Chancellor Tong and gave a banquet in his honor.

“During my journey here I heard your losses were severe,” said Tong.

Song Jiang replied with tears in his eyes. “When I went with Commissioner Zhao on the northern expedition against the Liao Tartars, we were victorious and didn't lose a single commander. But in this campaign against Fang La, even before we departed from the capital Gongsun Sheng left us. The emperor has retained several of our chieftains. After crossing the Yangzi, at each place we attacked we lost a few more. Recently, eight or nine have fallen ill in Hangzhou, and there's no guarantee they'll survive. We fought twice at Black Dragon Ridge, and lost another few. That sector is a combination of dangerous mountains and swift waters, a difficult place in which to battle. We haven't been able to break into the pass no matter how we've tried. How fortunate that your benevolent presence should come among us just when we were most distressed!”

“The emperor knows of your great accomplishments,” said Tong. “He's heard also of your losses, and therefore has dispatched me, with Generals Wang Bing and Zhao Tan, to assist you. I've sent Wang to General Lu's camp to distribute part of the rewards there.”

He introduced Zhao Tan to Song Jiang. The new-comers made their quarters in Tonglu Town, and were feted by their hosts.

The next day, in preparation for an assault on the ridge and the pass, Chancellor Tong mustered the troops. Wu Yong urged restraint.

“You must be cautious, Excellency. Let us send Yan Shun and Ma Lin along secluded paths to find some villager who can tell us of a route to the other side of the pass. Then we'll be able to launch a pincers' attack. The foe won't be able to cope with two fronts at once. We'll take the pass as easily as spitting on our hands.”

“An excellent idea!” Song Jiang agreed.

He dispatched the two chieftains with a few dozen stalwarts to scour the countryside for an informant. In the evening they returned with an old man.

“Who is he?” asked Song Jiang.

“A local person,” said Ma Lin. “He knows the mountain paths well.”

“Old fellow,” said Song Jiang, “if you can lead us past Black Dragon Ridge I'll reward you handsomely.

“My family have been ordinary residents around here for generations,” the old man said, “but Fang La is oppressing us cruelly and we have no place to hide. Fortunately, the emperor's soldiers have come and the people can have peace again, I'll take you beyond the ridge to Dongguan Town. Muzhou isn't far beyond. Near the city's North Gate, you swing around past the West Gate, and there's Black Dragon Ridge.”

Song Jiang was delighted. He directed that the old guide be given silver and kept in the camp. He had him served food and wine.

“Hold Tonglu County,” Song Jiang requested Chancellor Tong the following day. “I will go out with our troops near Muzhou and hit the ridge and the pass from both sides. We'll take them all right.”

On Chancellor Tong's instructions, Song Jiang divided his forces into two columns. With twelve chieftains, he marched off along a path. Tong led the other column openly down the road.

Song Jiang had a contingent of ten thousand. Guided by the old man they moved silently, the bridles of the horses muffled, the men biting stick gags. Halfway up the slope, they were intercepted by enemy soldiers. At Song Jiang's order, Li Kui, Xiang Chong, Li Gun and their man charged. They annihilated all four or five hundred of the foe.

Around the fourth watch the column reached Dongguan Town. Wu Yingxing the garrison commander had only three thousand troops. They couldn't possibly hold out against Song Jiang's overwhelming numbers. They left in a rush and returned to Muzhou. Wu reported to Deputy Prime Minister Zu.

“Song Jiang's army has slipped past Black Dragon Ridge and is already at Dongguan.”

Zu was shocked. He hurriedly called his generals into conference.

Meanwhile, on Song Jiang's instructions, cannoneer Ling Zhen fired off a volley, startling Shi Bao in the fort on the ridge. He sent Bai Qin and a detachment out to scout. They saw the banners of Song Jiang carpeting the plains and wooded slopes. They hastily returned to the fort and Bai Qin reported to Shi Bao.

“Since the king won't give us any reinforcements, we can only hold the pass,” said Shi Bao. “We can't go to the rescue.”

“You're making a mistake, Marshal!” Deng the National Advisor remonstrated. “Whether or not you aid Muzhou is up to you. But if the palace falls, there'll be no guarantee for any of us. Stay here if you like. I'm going to Muzhou!”

Shi Bao's urgings that he remain were useless. Deng mustered five thousand soldiers, took up his Buddhist staff, and departed with General Xiahou down the ridge.

Song Jiang's contingent at Dongguan, instead of driving on Muzhou, went first to assault the ridge and the pass, and ran directly into National Advisor Deng's force. As the two units neared each other, Deng rode forward and challenged individual combat. Hua Rong leaned close and whispered into Song Jiang's ear. Song Jiang nodded his agreement. He summoned Qin Ming and the three conferred. Then Qin Ming cantered out to meet Deng.

Fifty or sixty rounds they fought. Qin Ming turned and fled, and the Song army scattered. Thinking he had defeated Qin Ming, Deng abandoned him and galloped to capture Song Jiang.

Hua Rong was all prepared. Protecting Song Jiang, he waited until the National Advisor came near. Then he drew his bow to the full, aimed, and let fly. The arrow streaked like a comet into Deng's face and knocked him from his horse. The Song soldiers immediately closed in and killed him.

A wild and bloody battle ensued, and the southern troops were badly defeated. General Xiahou couldn't withstand the foe. He fled to Muzhou. Song Jiang's column raced to Black Dragon Ridge. But a rain of logs and ballista stones drove them back. Song Jiang turned his unit abruptly and headed for Muzhou.

Xiahou, in the southern capital, told Deputy Prime Minister Zu: “The Song army has passed Dongguan, killed National Advisor Deng, and will be here today!” Zu immediately deputed a man to go with Xiahou to Clear Stream and tell the prime minister. Lou relayed the information to the king.

“The Song army is already beyond Dongguan and is hurrying to attack Muzhou. We beg Your Majesty to dispatch troops quickly, or all will be lost.”

Fang La was astonished. He hastily summoned Marshal Zheng Biao to the palace, gave him fifteen thousand of the Royal Guards, and ordered him to reinforce Muzhou that same night.

“I shall obey your decree, Sire,” said Zheng, “But I request that the Royal Astrologer go with us, In that way we shall be able to defeat Song Jiang.”

The king agreed and summoned Bao Daoyi the royal astrologer. With palms pressed together, Bao bowed before the throne.

“Song Jiang and his army have invaded our territory and destroyed our cities, our troops and our generals. Even now they are marching on Muzhou,” said Fang La. “We hope you will work your magic, save our country and people, and preserve our land.”

“Set your mind at ease, Sire.” said Bao. “Though I am not talented, I do have a little learning. With the aid of Your Majesty's powerful good fortune, I shall sweep the ground with Song Jiang's army, and they shall lie everywhere dead and unburied.”

Very pleased, Fang La feted the astrologer. After the banquet, Bao bid the king farewell. Then he conferred on tactics with Zheng and Xiahou.

This Bao Daoyi hailed from the Jinhua Mountains. He became a priest very young, and studied the unorthodox school of Taoism. Later, he threw his lot in with Fang La, turned schemer and rebel, posed evil for righteousness and, whenever engaged in battle, used his wicked magic to harm others. He had a precious sword called the Occult Universe which could fly a hundred paces and kill a man. As a reward for his help in unvirtuous activities, Fang La named him Able Royal Astrologer.

Zheng Biao had been a constable in Lanxi County, Wuzhou Prefecture, and was a skilled wielder of spear and staff. After joining Fang La he was appointed Marshal of the Royal Guards. Entranced by Taoist magic, he became a disciple of Bao the Royal Astrologer, and learned many spells from him. Because whenever he was fighting to the death he could produce a mystic cloud, everyone called him Zheng the Prince of Demons.

Xiahou also was from the Wuzhou hills. He started life as a hunter, and was good with a steel pitchfork. He was part of the entourage of Deputy Prime Minister Zu ruling Muzhou.

Now, the three were conferring in the headquarters of the Royal Guards. The gate-keeper announced that the eunuch Pu Wenying had come to call on the Royal Astrologer.

Pu entered and said: “I have heard that you are considering how to cope with the Song army. Last night I examined the sky. The stars of the southern generals all are lusterless, while the stars of half of Song Jiang's generals are bright. Although it's good that you march against the foe, Royal Astrologer, I'm afraid you're doomed to failure. It would be better if you petitioned the king to discuss terms of surrender, and save the country from calamity.”

Furious, Bao whipped out his Occult Universe sword and, with one blow, cleaved Pu Wenying in two. He hurriedly reported the incident to the king in writing. Of that we'll say no more.

Then, the vanguard under Zheng Biao left Clear Stream. Bao followed with the central unit, Xiahou brought up the rear. They marched to save Muzhou.

Song Jiang's forces assailed Muzhou without any fixed plan. A mounted scout reported that reinforcements from Clear Stream had arrived for the beleaguered southerners. Song Jiang sent Stumpy Tiger Wang and his wife Ten Feet of Steel out with a patrol of three thousand cavalry to confront the foe. They met on the Clear Stream road, and Zheng Biao rode forth to engage Stumpy Tiger. Without exchanging a word they fought eight or nine rounds.

Zheng muttered an incantation under his breath, and shouted: “Speed!” A cloud of black vapor spewed from the top of his helmet. In the cloud stood a Heavenly spirit in golden armor, raising a Demon-Smiting precious cudgel. Panic-stricken, Stumpy Tiger floundered, and Zheng ran him through with his lance.

When Ten Feet of Steel saw her husband fall from the saddle, she charged Zheng brandishing her two steel-blue swords. They fought briefly and Zheng turned and galloped away. Burning for vengeance, the girl raced after him. Zheng put aside his lance and, from a silken pouch, drew out a gold-plated bronze brick. Suddenly he twisted around and flung it at his

pursuer's forehead. It struck squarely, and Ten Feet of Steel fell dead to the ground. Poor beautiful female warrior, her life was gone like a dream of spring!

Zheng the Prince of Demons pressed his advantage to drive back the Song patrol. The northerners were badly defeated. They returned and reported to Song Jiang that Stumpy Tiger and Ten Feet of Steel had been killed by Zheng Biao, and that the patrol had lost more than half its effectives.

Enraged by the death of his two chieftains, Song Jiang mustered five thousand men and rode out to battle, accompanied by Li Kui, Xiang Chong and Li Gun. They soon were within sight of Zheng the Prince of Demons and his contingent. Song Jiang cantered forward and shouted at Zheng angrily.

“Rebellious bandit, how dare you kill two of my chieftains!”

Zheng rode towards him with levelled lance. This infuriated Li Kui. Swinging his axes, Black Whirlwind raced out, covered by Xiang Chong and Li Gun, who also ran at Zheng twirling their shields. The Prince of Demons turned and fled, with the three hotly pursuing him, directly into the southerners' position. Fearful for Li Kui's safety, Song Jiang threw in another five thousand troops. The southerners broke and scattered.

Song Jiang had the trumpeters blow the call to reassemble. The two shield chieftains, escorting Li Kui back, suddenly found themselves enveloped in a black cloud that obscured the sky. They couldn't tell north from south, day from night. Song Jiang's army lost its sense of direction completely. Zheng the Prince of Demons had imposed a spell. The Song forces, unable to see a thing, began floundering about.

Song Jiang raised his face to Heaven and cried: “Am I really doomed to die in this place!”

By then it was already afternoon, and the cloud broke up and the mist dissolved. All around Song Jiang saw huge fellows in golden armor surrounding them in ranks. The Song forces prostrated themselves and waited for death. Song Jiang dismounted and surrendered.

“Kill me quickly,” he exclaimed. He crouched on the ground. He heard the sound of wind and rain, but he saw no one.

His officers and men covered their faces and waited for the thrusts that would finish them. But soon the wind and rain passed, and no blades descended.

A hand grasped Song Jiang and a voice said: “Arise, please!”

Song Jiang lifted his head and looked. Standing before him was a scholar. Astonished, Song Jiang scrambled to his feet and bowed.

“Who are you, sir?”

“My name is Shao Jun. I'm a native of these parts. I've come specially to inform you, righteous warrior—Fang La's number is nearly up. In only ten more days he'll be destroyed. I have expended myself several times on your behalf. Although you've suffered some difficulties today, relief will soon be here. Are you aware of that, righteous warrior?”

“When, exactly, can we capture Fang La, sir?”

The scholar gave him a push, and Song Jiang awakened. It had all been a dream. The huge fellows he had seen surrounding them were only pine trees, gilded by the sun.

He shouted for his chieftains to get up and find a road. The cloud and mist were gone, the sky was clear. Beyond the pines, yells were heard. Song Jiang led his men quickly in that direction. There was Sagacious Lu and Wu Song, about to engage Zheng Biao.

Royal Astrologer Bao, watching from his horse, saw Wu Song striding towards Zheng with a pair of swords. He pulled his Occult Universe sword from its scabbard and flung it. The blade bit into Wu Song's arm so deeply he fainted from loss of blood. Sagacious Lu, enraged, barged in with his iron staff. By the time be rescued his companion, Wu Song's arm was dangling inert, but they had captured Zheng's mystic sword. Wu Song

regained consciousness. With one slice of his knife, he cut off the useless left limb. Song Jiang ordered that he be carried back to camp to recuperate.

Sagacious Lu, who had barged right through to the rear of the enemy unit, now engaged General Xiahou. The two fought several rounds, and Xiahou left in defeat. Sagacious ploughed into the southern soldiers with his Buddhist staff. They fled in every direction. Xiahou headed for the wooded mountains. Sagacious pursued him tenaciously into their depths. Zheng the Prince of Demons and his troops came hurrying towards the Song contingent, Li Kui, Xiang Chong and Li Gun, with twirling shields, flying knives, swift javelins and mighty axes, rushed to meet them. Unable to stem the assault, Zheng retreated over hills and waterways. The three pursuers, although they were unfamiliar with the terrain, wanted to distinguish themselves before Song Jiang, and gave headlong chase across a stream.

On the west bank, three thousand southern soldiers suddenly blocked their path. Xiang Chong hastily turned to go back, only to find his retreat cut off at the shore by two southern commanders. He called to Black Whirlwind and Li Gun, but they were already well beyond in their pursuit of Zheng Biao.

Li Gun, fording another stream ahead, stepped unexpectedly into a deep hole and fell. He was immediately riddled by arrows and killed. Xiang Chong, as he attempted to plunge down the bank, was tripped up by a rope. Before he could struggle to his feet, southern soldiers swarmed all over him and hacked him to mincemeat.

Poor Li Gun and Xiang Chong, what chance had they to display their heroism! That left only Li Kui, continuing the chase into the mountains.

Meanwhile, the Song unit at the shore pushed across. Before they had gone half a *li* they heard shouts behind them. Hua Rong, Qin Ming and Fan Rui had caught up with reinforcements. Together, they smashed the southerners, drove into mountains and rescued Li Kui. Only Sagacious Lu was nowhere to be seen.

They returned and told Song Jiang what had happened. He wept bitterly. A count of his troops revealed he had lost about half. Sagacious Lu was

missing, and Wu Song was minus a left arm.

A mounted scout announced: “Military Advisor Wu Yong has come by water with ten thousand troops.”

Wu Yong arrived and explained: “Chancellor of Military Affairs Tong and his column have joined forces with the units under Generals Wang Bing, Zhao Tan and Liu Guangshi, and all are at the foot of Black Dragon Ridge. Only thirteen chieftains have been left behind. The remainder are here with me.”

Song Jiang told him of their losses, adding: “Wu Song is a cripple, and nobody knows what's become of Sagacious Lu. Is it any wonder I'm heartsore!”

“Take a broad view, brother,” Wu Yong urged. “This is the time to capture Fang La. It's a matter of major national importance. You mustn't let your distress over our brothers ruin your health.”

Song Jiang pointed at the surrounding pines and told Wu Yong about his dream.

“There must be a temple near here for you to have had such a remarkable dream,” said the Military Advisor. “That spirit who appeared obviously was protecting you.”

“You're absolutely right. Let's look around and see if we can find it.”

They walked into the wooded mountains. Sure enough, less than half an arrow-flight away, they came upon a temple. On a plaque in gold letters were inscribed the words: *Temple of the Black Dragon Spirit.*

The two men entered and gazed at the idol of the Dragon Spirit at the upper end of the building. Song Jiang was amazed. It was none other than the apparition which appeared to him in his dream! Song Jiang kowtowed and voiced his gratitude.

“I cannot thank you enough, oh Dragon Spirit, for saving me! I beg for your continuing aid. If I conquer Fang La, I shall petition the emperor to build here a magnificent temple, and confer on you an exalted title!”

After kowtowing once more the two left the building and examined the stone tablet in the courtyard. It said that during the Tang Dynasty a scholar named Shao Jun failed in the imperial examinations and drowned himself. The Lord of the Heavens pitied him and made him a Dragon Spirit. Thereafter, when the local people prayed for wind they got wind, when they prayed for rain they got rain. And so they built this temple and sacrificed in each of the four seasons.

Song Jiang called for a black pig and a white sheep and held his own sacrificial ceremony. On leaving the temple, he looked carefully at the surrounding pines, and told Wu Yong how they had marvelously been converted into giant warriors.

To this day there is a Temple of the Black Dragon King outside Yanzhou's North Gate. And the Forest of Ten Thousand Pines still stands.

Returning to headquarters, Song Jiang and Wu Yong sat up half the night discussing how to repel the enemy and attack Muzhou. Song Jiang then wearily laid his head on the table and slept. A voice announced: “Scholar Shao has come.” Song Jiang hastily got up and left the tent to greet him.

The Dragon Spirit bowed and said: “If I hadn't protected you yesterday, Bao the Royal Astrologer, who by a magic spell changed the pines into warriors, would have captured you. But I'm grateful for the sacrifices you made to me, and I've come specially to thank you. I want to tell you also that you soon will break into Muzhou, and within ten days capture Fang La.”

Song Jiang wanted to invite his visitor into the tent and question him further, when he was awakened by a sudden gust of wind. It had been another dream.

He urgently summoned the Military Advisor and told him what he had dreamt.

“Since the Dragon Spirit has appeared to you again, we definitely can launch our attack on Muzhou,” said Wu Yong.

“Perfectly correct,” cried Song Jiang.

At daybreak he ordered that the troops be mustered for an offensive against the city. He directed Yan Shun and Ma Lin to hold the Black Dragon Ridge road, and Guan Sheng, Hua Rong, Qin Ming and Zhu Tong to drive towards the North Gate with the vanguard. Ling Zhen was instructed to fire directly into the city nine vollies of Mother and Sons shells.

Their bursts shook the earth and sky, and the hills and mountains trembled. The southern soldiers in Muzhou were scared out of their wits. They were in a panic before the fighting even started.

The rear army contingent of Royal Astrologer Bao and Zheng the Prince of Demons had already been scattered by Sagacious Lu, and Xiahou chased off to parts unknown. The remainder withdrew into the city. Bao and Zheng conferred with Deputy Prime Minister Zu and the other leaders.

“The Song army is upon us,” they said. “What can save us?”

“Since ancient times whenever enemy soldiers are at the gates a battle to the death is the only solution,” said Zu. “If they break in, we'll surely be captured. The situation is critical. We must go forward.”

Zheng the Prince of Demons, seconded by Tan Gao and Wu Yingxing and a dozen or more subordinate officers, opened the gates and led forth ten thousand crack troops. Song-Jiang directed his forces to fall back half an arrow-flight, and permit the foe to emerge completely from the city and deploy in battle positions.

Bao the Royal Astrologer seated himself in an armchair atop the city wall. Deputy Prime Minister Zu, Advisor Shen, and Royal Inspector Huan also took seats and watched from the ramparts.

With levelled lance Zheng cantered forward. Song Jiang sent Guan Sheng the Big Halberd against him. They fought only a few rounds. No match for

Guan, Zheng could only parry and dodge.

Seeing this, Bao on the wall worked his magic. He muttered an incantation and shouted: “Speed!” Bao puffed out a breath, and from the top of Zheng's head black vapor billowed. In the cloud a spirit in golden armor appeared, grasping a Demon-Smiting Cudgel which he raised to strike. Another black cloud spread from the southern army.

Song Jiang immediately directed Fan Rui the Demon King Who Roils the World to counter the magic. He himself chanted the secret incantation from the Heavenly Books for dispelling wind and darkness.

From Guan Sheng's helmet rolled a white cloud. In it was a spirit astride a black dragon, an iron hammer in his hand. He charged the golden-armored spirit which had emerged from Zheng's head. The contending armies yelled as the supernatural warriors fought. After only a few rounds, the dragon-riding spirit drove off his opponent.

With one swing of his halberd Guan Sheng cut Zheng from his horse. Bao the Royal Astrologer, shocked by the wind and thunder amid the Song army, hastily started to rise. A flaming ball from Ling Zhen's heaven-shaking cannon smashed his head and body to smithereens.

The southern forces were defeated, and the Song army surged towards Muzhou. Zhu Tong ran Grand Marshal Tan Gao through with his lance, tumbling him from his mount. Li Ying's flying sword killed Garrison Commander Wu.

When the flaming cannon ball disintegrated Bao the Royal Astrologer, the southern soldiers on the wall scrambled down and ran. Song Jiang's troops were by now inside the city. In their massive advance they captured Deputy Prime Minister Zu, Advisor Shen and Royal Inspector Huan.

The subordinate officers were slain, every one, with no one bothering to ask their names.

Song Jiang burned Fang La's palace and distributed his gold and silks among the commanders. He also issued a proclamation reassuring the

populace. Even before a count of his soldiers was completed, a mounted messenger raced up with a report.

“On Black Dragon Ridge Ma Lin was knocked from his saddle by Bai Qin's javelin. Shi Bao sped over and cut him in two with his sword. Yan Shun dashed into the fray, but Shi Bao threw his Comet Hammer and killed him. Shi Bao is pressing his advantage to drive this way.”

Deeply grieved, Song Jiang wept over the death of yet another two chieftains. He ordered Guan Sheng, Hua Rong, Qin Ming and Zhu Tong to battle Shi Bao and Bai Qin, and capture Black Dragon Ridge and the pass.

And because the chieftains fought at Black Dragon Ridge they annihilated the enemy bandits in Clear Stream County and nabbed the hay-haired king in Bangyuan Cavern. The names of Song Jiang and his chieftains were inscribed in historical annals for a thousand years; the story of their splendid deeds has been passed down through the ages. They demonstrated their courage in Black Ridge Pass; in the cavern at Clear Stream they won their fame.

How did the Song Jiang forces meritoriously meet the foe? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 98
Lu Junyi Wages a Big Battle at Yuling Pass
Song Jiang Cleverly Takes Clear Stream Cavern

Guan Sheng and the other three chieftains led their men rapidly up Black Dragon Ridge. They soon encountered the army of Shi Bao.

“Bandit, how dare you kill my brothers!” Guan Sheng shouted from his horse.

Shi Bao saw it was Guan Sheng, and he lost his eagerness for combat. He withdrew to the top of ridge and ordered Bai Qin to take him on. The two had fought less than ten rounds when, from the summit, gongs hastily sounded the call to retreat. Guan Sheng did not pursue.

The southern soldiers had been thrown into confusion. Shi Bao, repelling the raiders from the east, had neglected the west. Now, a large unit under Chancellor Tong was swarming up this side of the ridge.

Song army general Wang Bing clashed with southern commander Jing De. After something over ten rounds, Wang cut Jing from his saddle. At the same time, chieftains Lu Fang and Guo Sheng raced to capture the top. But before they reached it, a huge boulder came bounding down. Guo Sheng and his steed were crushed to death.

Meanwhile on the east side Guan Sheng, noting the confusion in the southern position above, realized that Song forces must be attacking on the west, and led his men in a charge to the summit. The enemy contingent, assailed from two sides, was quite disorganized.

Lu Fang and Bai Qin met in battle. They hadn't fought three rounds when Bai lunged with his lance. Lu dodged and the thrust slid by his ribs. But Bai grabbed Lu's lance and twisted it completely around. Too close to ply their weapons, they both dropped them of one accord and, still mounted, grappled in hand-to-hand combat. The perilous ridge was a difficult place for horses to keep their footing. The strenuous wrestling of their riders threw the animals off balance. They stumbled over the edge and rolled down the cliff. Both warriors were killed in the fall.

Guan Sheng and his men drove upwards on foot. Shi Bao saw that he was blocked on both sides. He feared humiliation if captured. With his Wind Splitter Sword, he cut his own throat. The Song forces were in control of Black Dragon Ridge and the pass. Guan Sheng dispatched a swift messenger to Song Jiang with the news.

Upstream from Muzhou, another Song unit closed in, so that a squeeze was being exerted from both above and below. The four southern admirals in the naval base on the river saw that Black Dragon Ridge was gone, and that Muzhou had fallen. They abandoned their boats and fled to the opposite shore. There, the local people caught Cheng Gui and Xie Fu and turned them over to the conquerors in Muzhou. Zhai Yuan and Qiao Zheng managed to escape.

The large Song force under Chancellor Tong and Deputy District Commander Liu returned to Muzhou, and Song Jiang went out to welcome them into the city. The armies were installed in camps, and proclamations issued exhorting the people and local soldiers to resume their jobs. Countless southern troops had surrendered. Song Jiang opened the storehouses and distributed grain among the populace. They went back to their original occupations as good citizens.

The hearts of Admirals Cheng Gui and Xie Fu were cut out and offered in sacrifice to Ruan the Second and Meng Kang. Similar ceremonies were held for the chieftains slain on Black Dragon Ridge. Li Jun was ordered to take the captured high southern officials on many vessels and deliver them to Governor Zhang.

Song Jiang was greatly distressed by news of the death of Lu Fang and Guo Sheng. He made no further troop movements, but waited for Lu Junyi and his column. When Lu arrived they would jointly assault Clear Stream.

After the division of forces at Hangzhou, Lu had set forth with twenty-eight chieftains and thirty thousand men. They marched along mountain paths in the direction of Shezhou. Passing through Linan Town, an ancient capital, they neared Yuling Pass.

The pass was held by Pang Wanchun, one of Fang La's leading generals, and the best archer in the southern kingdom. His lieutenant commanders were called Lei Jiong and Ji Ji, each of whom operated an eight-hundred-catty crossbow which had to be cocked by foot pressure, and wielded a big spiny club. Pang had a force of three thousand. He had heard Lu was coming, and was all prepared, just waiting for him to get closer.

Lu sent an advance probe of thee thousand infantry under six mounted chieftains headed by Shi Jin. Winding towards the pass they didn't encounter a single enemy soldier. Shi Jin grew suspicious and conferred with the other chieftains.

At that moment a white banner appeared at the top of the pass, and beneath it stood the crack archer Pang Wanchun. Pang looked at Shi Jin and laughed.

“You should have stayed in Liangshan Marsh, scruffy bandit,” he said contemptuously, “where you begged an amnesty from the Song emperor. You've got a nerve coming to my country and playing the bold hero! Of course, you've heard of me, and I know you have among you some scamp called Hua Rong. Let him come out and match archery with me. But first I'll show you one of my marvellous shots.”

Before the words were out of his mouth, he whizzed an arrow at Shi Jin, hit him squarely and knocked him from his horse. The other five chieftains rushed forward, helped him back into the saddle, and they all withdrew.

A gong crashed on the mountain top, and from the pine groves on both sides swarms of arrows flew. The chieftains abandoned Shi Jin in their haste to get away. But when they rounded the gap, they saw Lei Jiong on one of the opposite slopes and Ji Ji on the other. The two deluged them with bolts from their crossbows. Not even the nimblest heroes could have avoided those lethal shafts. Poor Liangshan Marsh chieftains, life passed from them like a dream! Six of them lay below the pass in a heap of corpses.

Of the three thousand infantry only a hundred odd managed to escape. They told Lu what happened. It was a paralyzing blow. For a long time he sat in a dazed silence.

“Taking it so hard will only delay our important mission,” Zhu Wu the Miraculous Strategist said. “We can work out another plan, capture the pass, kill their generals and obtain our revenge.”

“Brother Song Jiang made a point of giving me many excellent chieftains,” said Lu, “but I've already lost six of them without winning the battle. And only a hundred or so of the three thousand infantry remain. How am I going to face him when we get to Shezhou!”

“The ancients had a saying: 'The time isn't as important as the terrain. But the terrain isn't as important as unity with the people.' We're all from Shandong and Hebei on the Central Plain. We're not used to hilly warfare, and so we lost the advantages of terrain. What we now need is one of the local people to serve as our guide, someone who can show us through the twists and turns of the local mountain paths.”

“You're quite right. Who can we send to scout the trails?”

“In my humble opinion, Flea on a Drum Shi Qian would be just right. He can fly over eaves and climb walls. He'll find a way if anyone can.”

Lu summoned Shi Qian and spoke to him. Flea on a Drum took some dry rations, hung his dagger at his waist, and left the camp.

He travelled half the day. As night began to fall he saw a lamp gleaming in the distance. “Where there's lamplight there must be people,” he thought, and groped towards it through the darkness.

The glow was coming from a small monastery. Flea on a Drum slipped in. An old monk was sitting in one of the buildings, chanting scriptures. Shi Qian knocked on the door. The old man told a young acolyte to open it. Flea entered and bowed.

“No need for ceremony, sir traveller,” said the monk. “What brings you here in these times of war and slaughter?”

“To tell you the truth, Reverend, I'm a commander under Song Jiang of Liangshan Marsh. My name is Shi Qian. We have been dispatched by imperial decree to destroy Fang La. But last night the bandit generals at Yuling Pass killed six of our chieftains with arrows, and we can't get through. My mission is to find out whether we can bypass it, and I've wandered here deep in the mountains. Can you help us solve the problem, Reverend? If you know of some path that will get us secretly by the pass, we'll reward you handsomely.”

“All the local people have been harmed by Fang La. There isn't one who doesn't hate him. The villagers here used to support me, but they've all ran away and scattered. I have no place to go, so I can only stay on and wait to die. Fortunately, the emperor's soldiers have arrived to restore happiness to the people. Finishing off the bandits will rid us of a scourge. I haven't dared to say much before, for fear the bandits would find out. But since you're a commander from the Imperial Army, I'll speak freely. There isn't any path here, but if you go to the ridge of the west mountain you'll find one that will

take you above the pass. I'm only afraid that the bandits have blocked it and you won't be able to get through."

"Do you happen to know whether it goes to the enemy's fort?"

"It goes behind it. Another path goes down from there through the pass. But you may not be able to get through. They've probably built a big stone barricade."

"As long as there's a path I'll get by no matter what they've built! You've given us our opening. I'll report back to my chief and you'll be richly rewarded."

"Please don't tell any outsiders you got the information from me."

"I'm a very careful person, Reverend. I won't give you away."

Shi Qian bid the old monk farewell, returned to camp, and told Lu Junyi about the path. Delighted Lu called his advisor into conference.

"Excellent," said Zhu Wu. "We'll take Yuling Pass as easily as spitting on our hands. We must send another man with Shi Qian so that they can put through our plan."

"What has to be done, Advisor?" asked Flea on a Drum.

"Setting blazes and firing a cannon are the most important. You'll have to carry the cannon, flint and steel, up behind the fort above the pass, and fire a shot as a signal. That's your main task."

"Is that all? Then I don't need anybody else. I can do it myself. No companion can fly over eaves and walls like I do. He'd only slow things down. While I'm doing my part of the job, how will you be capturing the fort?"

"That's easy. The foe are sure to have troops lying in ambush, and we'll have to deal with them. All we have to do is set to the torch every thicket and grove along the way, and they'll have no place to hide."

“Very shrewd, Advisor.”

Shi Qian took his fire-making equipment, toted the cannon in a pack upon his back, and bid Lu farewell. Lu gave him twenty ounces of silver and a bushel of rice for the old monk, directing a junior officer to carry the gifts.

In the afternoon of that day they reached the monastery. “Our Vanguard General is deeply grateful,” Shi Qian said to the monk. “He sends these small things as a token of his appreciation.”

Flea on a Drum handed over the gifts. He instructed the junior officer to go back to camp, then turned again to his host.

“Could I trouble you to tell your young acolyte to lead the way?”

“It would be better to wait till late at night. You might be seen from the fort during daylight.”

That evening the monk laid a meal for Shi Qian and, when it was night, said to his acolyte: “Lead this commander over there and come right back. Don't let anybody know.”

Shi Qian and the boy left the simple monastery and headed deep into the mountains. Through forests and over ridges, grasping bushes and vines, they laboriously climbed the rugged slopes in the dim light of a pale moon.

At last they came to a steep cliff face. Higher up were traces of a small path which had been cut into the rock. But at the top boulders had been piled and surmounted by a stone wall. How could anyone get past?

“Commander,” said the boy, “the fort is on the other side. There's a road leading to it from the wall.”

“You can go back, young acolyte. I know the way now.”

The boy departed.

Flea on a Drum was a man who could fly over roofs, walk on walls, leap fences and steal horses. Using that ability now, he scaled the barricade

easier than twiddling your thumbs.

In the wooded area to the east, half the sky was red. Lu and Zhu had broken camp and marched, setting fires as they advanced towards the fort. A forward unit of four or five hundred cleared the road of corpses, for the fires had left the enemy ambushers no place to hide.

Pang the crack archer in the fort above was informed. “Their method makes our ambushers useless,” he said. “But we'll hang on here. Let's see them get through!”

As the Song forces drew near, he rode out with Lei Jiong and Ji Ji to defend the entrance to the pass.

Step by step, Shi Qian crept towards the fort. He climbed a tall tree and concealed himself amid the leafy branches. He saw the three southern commanders, with bows and arrows and big crossbows, lying in wait outside the pass, and the Song column moving up like a trail of fire. Lin Chong and Huyan Zhuo reined in their horses below and shouted at the foe.

“Bandit generals, how dare you resist the emperor's troops!”

The southern commanders, intent on readying their bows, had no idea that Flea on a Drum was already above the pass. He slid down the tree stealthily and crept to the rear of the fort. There he saw two haystacks. He hid between them, took out his fire-making apparatus and placed the cannon on one of the stacks. With sulfur and nitrate, he ignited first one stack, then the other. Lighting the fuse, he climbed swiftly with the cannon to the roof of the fort. It went off with a heaven-shaking boom just as the two haystacks burst into blaze.

Panicked before the fighting even started, the southern soldiers yelled and ran. Who had any stomach for battle? While Pang and his two lieutenants watched flames leaping behind the fort, Shi Qian, on the roof, fired another blast from his cannon. The explosion shook the entire fort, terrifying the southerners so that they dropped their weapons, shed their armor, and fled through the fort's rear.

From his perch on top of the roof, Shi Qian uttered a loud cry: “Ten thousand Song troops are already in the pass! Surrender quickly if you don't all want to die!”

Scared out of his wits, Pang could only stamp in frustration. Lei and Ji were wooden with shock. They couldn't move a muscle.

Lin Chong and Huyan Zhuo were the first up the mountain. The other chieftains rushed beyond the fort and chased the fleeing foe more than thirty *li*. Sun Li caught Lei Jiong, Wei Dingguo captured Ji Ji. Only Pang Wanchun escaped. Over half the southern effectives were rounded up. The Song column camped at the fort.

Lu rewarded Flea on a Drum generously. He cut the hearts from Lei Jiong and Ji Ji and offered them as sacrifices to Shi Jin and Shi Xiu and the other four chieftains who had been slain. Their six bodies were recovered and buried high on the slope. All the other corpses were burned.

The next day Lu and his chieftains donned their armor and mounted. Lu rushed a dispatch to Governor Zhang reporting the capture of the pass. At the same time, the column hastened through and marched directly to the outskirts of Shezhou, where they made camp.

Prince Fang Hou, the Governor of Shezhou, was Fang La's uncle on his father's side. Under him were two generals, and together they ruled Shezhou Prefecture. One was Minister Wang Yin, the other Vice-Minister Gao Yu. They garrisoned Shezhou with twenty thousand troops led by a dozen or more commanders. Wang originally was a stonemason in the Shezhou hills. He wielded a steel lance and rode a fine horse called Around the Mountains Flyer. This steed could climb slopes and ford rivers as if on level land. Gao was also a local man. He came from an old family. His weapon was a segmented lance. Because both were only slightly literate, Fang La, while giving them high administrative posts, actually limited them to military affairs.

After his defeat, Pang Wanchun returned to Shezhou and reported to the prince in the palace. “A native resident gave us away,” said Pang. “He

guided the Song forces along a secluded path to the pass. Our soldiers were scattered and we were unable to resist."

The prince was furious. "Yuling Pass is the most important barrier before Shezhou! Now that the Song troops have taken it, they'll be here sooner or later! How are we going to repel them?"

"Restrain your anger, Your Highness," urged Minister Wang. "As the ancients have said; 'Failure in battle should not be censured. Heaven gives perfection to no one.' Postpone punishing General Pang. Instead, issue a decree that he must win. Let him lead forth an army to drive back the Song column. If he fails to wrest victory, his crimes can be treated as double."

Fang Hou agreed. He gave Pang five thousand soldiers and ordered them to march, demanding that they return triumphant.

That day Lu Junyi launched his assault on Shezhou. The city gates opened and General Pang emerged with his large contingent. The two armies deployed in battle positions. Pang rode forward and challenged personal combat. From the Song side Ou Peng, carrying an iron lance, cantered out to meet him.

Less than five rounds they fought when Pang withdrew in defeat. Ou Peng, wanting to display his valor, galloped after. Pang turned in the saddle and let fly with an arrow. The skilful warrior Ou Peng caught it in mid-air. He didn't know that the southern general shot his arrows in series. After snatching the first missile, he raced heedless in pursuit of his foe. Pang's bow-string twanged, and a second shaft hit Ou Peng squarely, knocking him to the ground. Ministers Wang and Gao, on the city wall, saw Ou Peng fall and Pang lead his unit in a fierce charge.

The Song forces, defeated, retreated thirty *li* before making camp. A count of their officers and men revealed that Zhang Qing the Vegetable Gardener had been killed in battle. Sun the Witch, with the help of her soldiers, retrieved her husband's body and burned it. She wept distractedly. Lu was distressed at the sight. He felt his tactics were wrong.

“We lost another two chieftains in our attack today,” he said to Zhu Wu. “How can we go on like this?”

“Victory and defeat are both usual fare to military men, and times of life and death are all predestined,” said Zhu Wu. “The southerners believe they've compelled us to retreat. They're sure to launch a sneak raid against our camp tonight. We can move out and lie in ambush on four sides. In the center of camp we can tether a few sheep and then ...” Zhu Wu whispered the rest of his plan.

Huyan Zhuo hid with one unit to the left of the camp, Lin Chong with another unit to the right, Shan Tinggui and Wei Dingguo with a third unit to the north, and the other chieftains with the remaining forces along the paths all around. When the southerners raided that night, fire in the middle of the camp would be the signal for the ambushers to strike. The Song contingents took up their positions.

Meanwhile, Ministers Wang and Gao, who knew a bit of strategy, conferred with Fang Hou the king's uncle. They said: “We beat the Song forces today and forced them back thirty *li.* Their camp is defenseless, their men and horses exhausted. If we raid them now we can win a complete victory.”

“Work it out carefully. If you're sure you can do it, go ahead.”

“Pang and I will stage the raid,” said Gao. “You and Wang stay here and guard the city.”

That night the two generals donned their armor and marched with their troops. The horses' equipage was muffled, the men clamped sticks in their teeth to ensure silence. Nearing the camp, they saw that the stockade gate was open, and were hesitant to advance any further. The sound of the watch drum was clear, but its beat was confused. Gao reined his mount.

“Don't go in.”

“Why not, sir Minister?”

“Their watch beat is all wrong. They must be up to something.”

“Surely you're mistaken, sir. They're defeated, dispirited and weary. Even the watchman must be half asleep. No wonder his beat is sloppy. It's nothing to worry about. Let's just push on in.”

“You're probably right.”

They urged their raiders forward. Armed to the teeth, the troops entered the camp. The two southern generals went directly to headquarters, but not a commander was in sight. Suspended a few feet above the ground from some willows were a couple of sheep, drum-sticks tied to their legs. When they kicked about, they struck the drums beneath them. Thus, the erratic beat. The raiders had captured an empty camp.

“We've been tricked!” the two generals cried in alarm. They turned and ran.

Flames had begun to rise in the center of the stockade. On a mountain top a cannon boomed, and a fiery ball hit the camp. On four sides the men who had been lying in ambush now charged fiercely. The two generals, rushing through the stockade gate were met by Huyan Zhuo.

“If you want to live, bandits,” he roared, “dismount and surrender!”

Minister Gao fled in panic. He wanted only to escape, he had no heart for battle. Huyan caught up, and brought his twin rods down in a blow that shattered half of Gao's skull.

General Pang fought desperately to break out of the encirclement. Just as he was getting away, a hooked pole snaked out and tripped up his horse. Tang Long, who had been hiding by the side of the road, captured Pang alive.

Song chieftains were slaughtering southern soldiers on all the mountain paths. At daybreak, they returned to camp. Lu Junyi, seated once again in his headquarters, handed out rewards. Of that we'll say no more.

A count of Lu's forces revealed the loss of chieftain Ding Desun. While in the mountains he had been bitten in the foot by a snake. The poison had seeped into his abdomen and killed him. The Song victors cut the heart out

of Pang Wanchun and offered it in sacrifice to Ou Peng, Shi Jin and the other slain brothers, and sent Pang's head to Governor Zhang.

The next day, Lu and his column marched to Shezhou. The gate was open, no banners flew on the walls, the ramparts were devoid of soldiers. Shan Tinggui and Wei Dingguo, eager to win first honors, dashed in with a detachment before Lu could stop them. By the time he arrived with his central unit, they were already inside.

Minister Wang had been informed of the losses the southerners had sustained in their abortive raid on the camp. He pretended to have abandoned the city and dug a large concealed hole within the gate. When the two Song chieftains barged in, horses and riders landed in the pit. Southern spearsmen and archers, who had been hiding on either side, riddled them with spears and arrows. Poor mortals, their spirits left them in an earthen hole!

Angered by their loss, Lu ordered his vanguard to attack. Each man carried a clod of earth which he threw into the pit, then went on to join the wild carnage. In the end it was the bodies of southern soldiers and horses which filled the cavity.

On a cavorting steed at the head of his troops, Lu galloped to the center of Shezhou and ran directly into Fang Hou the king's uncle. They fought only a single round when Lu in his terrible fury called on all his might and cut Fang Hou from the saddle with a single thrust of his halberd.

The southern troops opened the West Gate and fled, hotly pursued by the Song forces. Many of the foe were killed or captured.

Meanwhile, the fleeing Minister Wang was stopped by Li Yun. Wang levelled his lance and cantered forward. Li Yun was on foot. Wang's charging steed knocked Li to the ground. Shi Yong, also on foot, ran to the rescue. But he was helpless against the southerner's lance, which darted like demon. After several rounds, it took Shi Yong's life.

From the city Sun Li, Huang Xin, Zhou Yuan and Zhou Run raced out and assailed Wang. He battled all four courageously and without fear. But then

the formidable Lin Chong joined the fray. Even if he had three heads and six arms Wang couldn't have withstood five chieftains. In a concerted move, they closed in and stabbed him to death. Poor southern minister, thus ended his aspirations!

They cut off his head and galloped with it to General Lu, who was resting in the Shezhou palace. Order had been restored and proclamations reassuring the populace posted. The troops were already stationed in the city. Lu dispatched a messenger to Governor Zhang with news of the victory, and sent a similar report to Song Jiang.

Song Jiang, waiting with his army in Muzhou, was pleased that the joint offensive against the enemy's lair could now begin. But he was devastated by the loss of thirteen more chieftains, and he wept as though his heart would break. Military Advisor Wu Yong consoled him.

“Life and death are pre-ordained. Don't ruin your health with grieving. You have to deal with matters of major national importance.”

“Yes, I know, but I can't help feeling awful. One hundred and eight are listed on the stone tablet in Heavenly script. Who would have thought we'd be cut down so severely. It's like losing my arms and legs!”

Wu Yong begged Song Jiang to calm himself. “Reply to Lu and fix a date for an assault on Clear Stream County,” he urged.

Meanwhile, Fang La in his palace in Bangyuan Cavern in Clear Stream County summoned all of his top officials, civil and military, to discuss how to deal with Song Jiang's army. Leaders of defeated troops who had just returned reported: “Shezhou is finished, the Royal Uncle and Ministers Gao and Wang have been killed. The Song army is advancing in two columns to attack Clear Stream.”

Startled, Fang La said to his ministers: “You have been appointed to the highest positions and have reaped the benefits of ruling our prefectures, shires and towns. But Song Jiang's army is rolling across the land and all of

our cities have fallen, except for Clear Stream and this palace. Now he is coming here as well, in two columns. How shall we repel the foe?”

Prime Minister Lou Minzhong came forward and said: “The Song forces have nearly reached our palace, and it will be difficult to defend. Our soldiers are weak, our generals few. Unless Your Majesty takes personal command I'm afraid they won't do their utmost.”

“It is indeed as you say,” Fang La agreed, and he issued the order: “Let all officials of every rank prepare to go with me and fight a decisive battle.”

“Who will lead the vanguard?” queried Lou.

“The Security General, Governor and Commander-in-Chief, our Royal Nephew Fang Jie. General Du Wei, Marshal of the Infantry and Cavalry, shall be his second in command. Under them will be thirty commanders leading fifteen thousand troops of the Royal Guards. Let them open paths through the mountains, bridge rivers, and advance in an offensive expedition.”

Fang Jie, nephew of the king, was also the grandson of Fang Hou who had been killed at Shezhou. He had been about to ask to be sent out to avenge his grandfather, and now he was appointed leader of the vanguard. A diligent person, Fang Jie wielded a crescent-bladed halberd and was utterly fearless.

Du Wei had been a blacksmith in the mountains of Shezhou. He could forge arms and was a trusted confidant of Fang La. In battle he used six throwing knives. He fought on foot.

Fang La appointed Ho Conglong, who was master-instructor of Royal Guards, commander of another ten thousand Royal Guards, and ordered him to march against Lu Junyi in Shezhou.

Song Jiang's army meanwhile was advancing on land and water from Shezhou to Clear Stream. Li Jun was in charge of the naval units proceeding along the river. Wu Yong, riding by Song Jiang's side, had a suggestion.

“Fang La must know we're closing in. If he decides to hide in the mountains he'll be hard to find. To catch him and bring him before the emperor in the capital, we'll have to operate from within and without. Someone who recognizes him has to point him out before we can nab him. We also have to know where he's heading, so he won't escape.

“A false surrender will get our people inside his camp and enable us to cope with his moves. Chai Jin and Yan Qing have already gone as spies, but we haven't heard anything from them. Who should we have to pretend to surrender?”

“Li Jun would be best, in my humble opinion. He can sail in with grain boats and offer them as his entry gift. That will allay their suspicions. Fang La is a petty-minded fellow from a mountain hamlet. When he sees so much grain, he won't be able to turn it down.”

“Very clever, Military Advisor,” said Song Jiang. He dispatched Dai Zong with secret instructions to Li Jun.

The naval chieftain thereupon directed Ruan the Fifth and Ruan the Seventh to disguise themselves as captains and the Tong brothers to pretend to be sailors. They then set sail from Daxi with sixty vessels laden with grain. All flew banners indicating that they were delivering the cargo as a gift. As they neared Clear Stream County, they were met by a southern warcraft which showered them with arrows.

From the deck, Li Jun shouted: “Cease fire! I have something to say. We have come to surrender! We present this grain to your great country as a gift to your soldiers. We hope you will accept.”

Clearly Li Jun and his men were unarmed. The southerners stopped shooting. They sent a boarding party, which made a careful examination then reported back to Prime Minister Lou.

“Li Jun is surrendering with a gift of grain.”

Lou ordered that he be permitted to land. Brought before Lou, Li Jun bowed.

“What are you to Song Jiang?” Lou demanded. “What's your rank? Why have you come with this grain to surrender?”

“My name is Li Jun. Originally I was a bold fellow on the Xunyang River. I snatched Song Jiang from the execution grounds in Jiangzhou and saved his life. But now that he has been amnestied by the emperor and made a Vanguard General, he's forgotten the favor I and my mates have done him. Several times, he's humiliated me. Although he's occupied a number of prefectures in your great country, many of our brothers have been killed. He himself doesn't know whether to advance or retreat, but he's forcing me and my naval forces to go forward. I can't take any more of his insults! So I'm turning his grain vessels over as my personal gift, and surrendering to your great country.”

Convinced, Lou conducted Li Jun to Fang La in the palace and told him about it. Li Jun kowtowed and repeated his story. Fang La saw no reason to doubt him. He appointed Li Jun Chief Admiral, and made admirals of Ruan the Fifth, Ruan the Seventh, Tong Wei and Tong Meng. The boats were to be moored in the Clear Stream naval installation.

“After I have driven back Song Jiang and restored my royal rule, I will reward you further,” Fang La promised.

Li Jun bowed his thanks and left the palace. He unloaded the grain and delivered it to the granary. Of that we'll say no more.

Meanwhile, Song Jiang sent Guan Sheng, Hua Rong, Qin Ming and Zhu Tong forward with a probing contingent to the border of Clear Stream County. There they met Royal Nephew Fang Jie and his army. The two forces spread out in battle formation.

In the southern position, Fang Jie sat his horse, holding his halberd athwart. To his rear was Du Wei, on foot. Clad in full armor five throwing knives concealed behind his back, Du Wei carried a seven-starred precious sword. The two men proceeded to the front.

Qin Ming rode out from Song Jiang's position. Brandishing his wolf-toothed mace, he cantered directly towards Fang Jie. Without a word from

either, they dashed. Fang Jie was young and spirited, and highly skilled with the crescent-bladed halberd. They fought more than thirty rounds, with neither emerging the victor. Both men battled relentlessly, exerting their utmost talent.

Since Fang Jie obviously wasn't making any progress, Du Wei slipped out from behind his horse and threw a knife directly at Qin Ming's face. As the thunderbolt dodged the flying blade, Fang Jie finished him with one thrust of his halberd. Poor Qin Ming the thunderbolt, he died an untimely death!

Fang Jie dared not press his advantage to attack the Song position. Junior officers quickly pulled back their slain leader with hooked poles. When informed of the loss of Qin Ming, Song Jiang blanched. He directed that the body be encoffined and prepared for burial, and again sent forward another contingent.

Emboldened by his triumph, Fang Jie shouted: “If you have any more bold warriors, let them come out and fight!”

Song Jiang hurried to the front. To the rear of Fang Jie he saw Fang La's royal entourage advancing in a body, amid poles topped by golden gourds and row upon row of battle-axes. There were lines of crescent-bladed halberds, corps of flags embroidered with dragon and phoenix, pennants of green and red, jade stirrups, tooled leather saddles, banners encrusted with pearls and sewn with kingfisher-blue thread. On panoplies of dragons rampant were stitched azure clouds and purple mist. On flags of flying tigers were designs of auspicious clouds and smoke. Civil officials stood to the left, military to the right, all in full ranks. The usurper king made a great show of having “ministers.” No better than a bandit in the hills, he aspired to sovereign's rule!

And there in the middle, beneath a nine-segment imperial yellow umbrella, seated easily on a steed with a jade-encrusted bridle, was the usurper king himself—Fang La. He wore a high hood of bright gold with turned-up corners and a robe embroidered with nine dragons amid sun, moon, and clouds. A jade belt embossed with gold and precious stones bound his waist. His feet were shod in a pair of royal boots stitched in gold thread with soles of cloud design.

On a silver-white thoroughbred he rode to the front to direct the battle personally. He spotted Song Jiang, opposite on horseback, and ordered Fang Jie to capture him. The Song forces also prepared to fight and catch Fang La. Fang Jie was about to go forth when a mounted messenger galloped up and reported.

“The Song forces under General Lu Junyi captured Ho Conglong when his army went to the rescue of Shezhou. They have scattered our troops and are already at the rear of the mountain!”

Fang La was shocked. He hastily ordered a withdrawal and a defense of the palace. Fang Jie instructed Du Wei to hold the position while the king retreated, then the two commanders followed.

On arriving in Clear Stream, Fang La heard cries and lamentations rising from the palace. Everywhere was the glow of flames. Soldiers and horses milled about in confusion. Li Jun and his four companions had set the city to the torch. Fang La rushed in with his Royal Guards in an attempt to save Clear Stream.

Song Jiang and his army gave chase, fighting and killing. They saw that the city was on fire and knew that Li Jim and the others had performed their mission. They drove on. Just then Lu Junyi and his column rounded the mountain, and they joined forces and attacked together.

The Clear Stream palace was crushed in a vice of Song troops. Everywhere they captured southern soldiers. They broke the defenses of the city completely. Guarded by Fang Jie and his men, the king fled to Bangyuan Cavern.

Song Jiang and his main army entered Clear Stream. They sacked Fang La's palace, destroying his illegal royal paraphernalia and confiscating his valuables. They burned the palace to the ground and cleaned out his treasury and granary.

Reunited, the forces of Song Jiang and Lu Junyi made camp in Clear Stream, and the chieftains came forward to claim their rewards. A count revealed more losses. The tall Yu Baosi and Sun the Witch had died of

wounds inflicted by Du Wei's throwing knives. Zou Yuan and Du Qian were trampled to death by horses. LiLi, Tang Long and Cai Fu had all been severely wounded, and medical treatment had been of no avail. Ruan the Fifth had been killed by Prime Minister Lou in Clear Stream County.

The chieftains received awards for the ninety-two southern officials they had caught. Lou and Du Wei had disappeared. Notices were posted reassuring the population, and the captured officials were sent to governor Zhang's headquarters, where they would be decapitated and their heads hung up on display.

A local informant reported: “When your army broke into Clear Stream, Lou hung himself in a pine grove because he killed Ruan the Fifth.”

Du Wei hid in the home of the mistress he was keeping, a young singer. Her pander exposed him, and Song Jiang rewarded the man. On Song Jiang's orders Du was decapitated. Cai Qing cut out Du Wei's heart and offered it, dripping blood, in sacrifice to the chieftains who died in the Clear Stream battle. Song Jiang officiated personally at the ceremony.

The next day, he and Lu Junyi marched with their units to Bangyuan Cavern and surrounded the entrance. Fang La sat tight in his cavern, defended only by Fang Jie and his troops. But the southerners would not come out and fight, and the Song contingents had no way of getting in. Although Fang La was on pins and needles, there was nothing else he could do. The stalemate continued for several days.

Fang La was sunk in gloom. Suddenly, a high official in an embroidered silken robe prostrated himself at the foot of the gold dais. “I have no talents, Sire,” said the man, “but I have never repaid for the great benevolence Your Majesty has bestowed upon me. I am familiar with all the books of military lore and have devoted my life to weaponry. If you will give me a detachment, Sire, I will drive back the Song army and restore our nation. I hope my proposal meets with Your Majesty's wishes.”

Delighted, Fang La mustered the soldiers in the cavern palace and sent the man forth with them to fight Song Jiang. It was impossible to predict who would win, since both sides were strikingly impressive.

And because Fang La dispatched this unit, heads rolled at the foot of the golden dais and hot blood spattered the jade-panelled palace door. Fang La's nest was swept clean and Song Jiang performed a great deed.

Who led forward Fang La's southern soldiers? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 99
Sagacious Lu Expires in Zhejiang in a Trance
Song Jiang Goes Home in His Official Finery

The official who offered to lead the expedition from the Cavern was none other than Ke Yin the Duke Consort. Fang La was overjoyed.

“We are very fortunate,” he said, “that the consort is willing to exercise his might in battle against the brigands. We gladly utilize his genius to regain our national glory.”

Ke Yin immediately prepared to set forth with his troops. Yun Bi was his second in command. Fang La presented the consort with his personal golden armor and silken robe and a fine horse. Accompanied by Fang Jie the Royal Nephew and more than twenty generals, Ke Yin marched from Bangyuan Cavern with ten thousand of the Royal guards and spread out in battle position.

The news was reported to Song Jiang and Lu Junyi, who also deployed their forces. They saw Duke Consort Ke Yin riding forward. No one recognized him as Chai Jin. Song Jiang ordered Hua Rong to fight him. Lance at the ready, Hua Rong cantered to the front and shouted derisively at his challenger.

“Who are you, knave, that you dare help rebels against the Imperial Army? Just wait till I get my hands on you! I'll pound you to mincemeat! Dismount and surrender, and I'll spare your life!”

“I'm Ke Yin from Shandong. Everyone knows my fame. A bunch of scruffy robbers like you from Liangshan Marsh are really beneath my notice! We're

more than a match for you! I'm determined to wipe you out and recapture our cities!”

Song and Lu, on their horses, listened and thought: “That's Chai Jin's voice. He never in the past said anything which indicated he might betray us. He's changed his name from Chai Jin to Ke Yin, but the names mean virtually the same thing.”

“Before Lord Chai became an outlaw he often gave shelter to wanted men and disguised them as merchants,” said Wu Yong. “Can he have forgotten his old loyalties?”

“Let's see what happens in his joust with Huan Rong,” said Lu Junyi. Hua Rong kicked his steed faster. The horses met, the weapons clashed, and the warriors fought. Gradually they moved into a ravine, battling ever closer to one another.

“Pretend to be defeated, brother,” Chai Jin said in a low voice. “I'll explain later.”

Hua Rong heard. After three rounds, he turned his mount and withdrew.

“Beaten officer, I won't chase you,” Ke Yin shouted. “Is there anyone else who thinks so well of himself? Let him come out and fight!”

Hua Rong galloped back to the position and told Song and Lu what had happened. “Let Guan Sheng do combat,” Wu Yong suggested. Waving his halberd, with its blue dragon etched into the steel, Guan Sheng raced to the front.

“Petty officer from Shandong,” he yelled, “I dare you to joust with me!”

Fearlessly, they battled less than five rounds when Guan Sheng feigned defeat and returned to the Song lines. Ke Yin did not pursue. Instead, he rode forward and shouted another challenge.

“Is there any strong general among you who dares to fight?”

On Song Jiang's orders, Zhu Tong was the next contender. Back and forth the two battled, deceiving both armies. After only six or seven rounds, Zhu Tong fled. Chai Jin gave chase and lunged in a false thrust with his lance. Zhu Tong leaped from his saddle and ran back to the Song position.

The southern soldiers captured the abandoned horse and the consort waved them forward in a wild charge. Song Jiang and his troops hastily retreated ten *li* before making camp. Ke Yin pursued them for a distance, then returned with his contingent to the cavern.

The news was reported to Fang La: “The heroic duke consort has defeated three enemy generals and driven the Song forces back ten *li.”*

Fang La, delighted, ordered a royal banquet. After the consort had removed his armor he was invited into the rear palace and given a seat of honor at the festive board. The king raised his gold goblet and toasted him personally.

“I knew you were a scholar, but I never realized you had such military skill! Had I known earlier what a hero you are, we wouldn't have lost so many cities. Give full play to your brilliance, slaughter the bandits, and restore our sovereignty, and you shall share with us the glories of peace and enjoy together national restoration.”

“Rest assured, Sire,” said Ke Yin. “I will do my utmost. I pray Your Majesty will watch tomorrow from the top of the hill while I annihilate Song Jiang and the rest of his crew!”

Fang La consented. He was very pleased. That night they feasted until late, then each retired to his quarters in the palace.

The next morning Fang La held no royal court, but ordered the slaughter of steers and horses to feed his troops to the full. Then all donned armor and mounted. They rode cheering from the cavern, amid waving banners and pounding drums. Accompanied by his retinue and cabinet officials, the king climbed to the top of the hill above the cavern to watch the duke consort do battle.

Song Jiang transmitted this order to all his chieftains: “Today's engagement will be critical. Do your utmost to catch Fang La, but don't kill him. When your soldiers see Chai Jin in the southern position turn his horse, charge after him into the cavern and capture Fang La.”

Rubbing their hands in anticipation, the northerners took up their weapons. Every man was eager to plunder the riches of the cavern, and win glory and rewards by seizing Fang La.

The Song forces deployed outside the cavern. On the southern side, Ke Yin sat his horse beneath an arch of pennants, about to ride forth into combat. But Fang Jie the Royal Nephew, his lance held athwart his saddle, intervened.

“Wait until I've killed one of their generals,” he urged. “Then you can lead our men against the foe.”

The Song units were pleased to see that Yan Qing was standing behind Chai Jin. “This scheme is sure to succeed,” they said, and prepared for action.

Fang Jie rode forward and issued his challenge. From the Song position Guan Sheng cantered out, brandishing his halberd. The two warriors had fought only ten rounds or so when Hua Rong joined in the fray. Though assailed by two opponents, Fang Jie battled without fear. They could not subdue him, but gradually he was forced onto the defensive.

Then Li Ying and Zhu Tong rode forth and also attacked. Four against one were too much. Fang Jie turned his mount and started to leave. Ke Yin emerged from the arch of pennants and blocked his way. The consort waved his hand, and the four Song chieftains closed in, while Ke Yin himself charged with levelled lance. Fang Jie jumped from his steed and tried to flee, but Chai Jin pierced him with a single thrust. Yan Qing dashed up from behind and finished Fang Jie off with his sword.

The southern soldiers were stunned. Then they ran for their lives. The “duke consort” raised his voice in a shout.

“I am not Ke Yin but Chai Jin, a chieftain in the army of Song Jiang. The Royal Attendant, with me, is actually Yan Qing the Prodigy. We now know all about everything inside and outside the cavern. Whoever captures Fang La alive will be made a high official and ride a fine horse. Surrender and avoid bloodshed! Resist and be slaughtered with your entire family!”

Chai Jin, Yan Qing and the four chieftains, leading a large contingent, drove into the cavern. Fang La saw it all from the top of the hill. Angrily, he kicked over his golden throne and plunged deep into the hills. When five columns of Song Jiang's army rushed into the cavern, they discovered he was gone, and caught only some of his retinue.

Yan Qing and a few trusted confidants, after removing two loads of gold and jewels from the treasury, set fire to the inner palace. When Chai Jin entered his own consort's residency, he found that his wife the princess had hung herself. He burned the residency down, cremating her inside it. He allowed her attendants to run away.

In the main palace the Song chieftains slaughtered everyone—the king's concubines, his personal guards, his royal relations... and plundered his treasures. Song Jiang urged them to search the palace for Fang La.

Ruan the Seventh discovered in an inner room the trunk in which Fang La kept his crown, his royal robe, his green jade belt, his white jade scepter, his Care-Free boots. He couldn't resist the temptation to try the lavish finery on. In full regal attire, he mounted his steed and trotted to the front of the palace. The soldiers at first thought he was Fang La. But when they crowded around they saw it was Ruan the Seventh, and everyone laughed. Ruan thought it was all a great joke, and rode about the palace grounds watching the looting.

Wang Bing and Zhao Tan, the two generals who had come from the Eastern Capital with Minister Tong, had taken part in the assault on Bangyuan Cavern. They heard the tumult among Song Jiang's troops, and someone said that Fang La had been caught. They hurried to join in the seizure so that they could claim some of the credit. But they saw only Ruan the Seventh, all togged out the royal robe, the crown upon his head, laughing uproariously.

“You've got a nerve dressing up like Fang La and making a spectacle of yourself!” they fumed.

Ruan pointed his finger at them and raged. “Who do you pricks think you are! If it weren't for our brother Song Jiang your donkeys' heads would have been chopped off by Fang La long ago! All you can do is try to cut in on the glory my brother chieftains and I have earned! You'll go back and tell the emperor it couldn't have done without the help of you two big generals!”

Wang and Zhao, infuriated, were ready to fight. Ruan snatched a spear and raced towards them. Huyan Zhuo, who witnessed the quarrel, galloped up and separated the contestants. An officer had notified Song Jiang, and he too hurried to the scene. He and Wu Yong yelled at Ruan to dismount, remove the royal vestments and cast them aside. Song Jiang apologized to the two generals. Although Wang and Zhao had no choice but to accept the placatory words of Song and his chieftains, inwardly they would not forget their hatred.

That day corpses littered the ground in Bangyuan Cavern, and blood flowed in streams. According to *Song Annals* over twenty thousand of Fang La's soldiers were annihilated. On Song Jiang's orders, the palace buildings were put to the torch. The royal halls, the ornate towers, the inner chambers, the bejewelled alcoves—all were reduced to ashes. The Song army made camp at the entrance to Bangyuan Cavern and built a stockade, A check of the prisoners revealed that only Fang La had escaped. Song Jiang ordered a search of the mountains and had the local populace notified: Whoever captured Fang La would be recommended to the emperor for a high official post; whoever supplied information as to his whereabouts would be rewarded.

Meanwhile Fang La scurried through the mountains like a dog whose master just died, like a fish which evaded the net. Discarding his robe of imperial yellow, his golden-flowered hood, his royal court boots, he fled over the heights in grass and hempen sandles. In a single night he crossed five mountains.

He came at last to a hollow. There, nestled against a slope was a rude monastery. Fang La was hungry. He started towards it to ask for something

to eat. From behind a pine tree a big fat monk suddenly emerged. He knocked Fang La down with his Buddhist staff and tied him up. The cleric was none other than Sagacious Lu the Tattooed Monk. He took Fang La to the monastery, obtained some food, then started down with him. They met a party of soldiers who had been searching the mountains for the former king. Together, they escorted the captive under guard and brought him before Song Jiang.

When he saw who it was, Song Jiang was delighted. “Where did you find him, Reverend?” he asked Sagacious Lu.

“After the battle in the Grove of Ten Thousand Pines on Black Dragon Ridge, I chased Xiahou Cheng into the mountains and killed him. I pushed on in deeper, looking for more of the southern brigands. But I got lost and was wandering around when I met an old monk on a wild and verdant slope. He led me to his rustic monastery and said: 'We've plenty of fuel and grain and vegetables. Wait here. If you see a big fellow come out of the pine forest, grab him.' I saw fires burning at the foot of the mountains, and kept watch all night. I didn't know where the paths ran in those parts. But this morning I spotted this rogue climbing over the rise. So I knocked him down with my staff and tied him up. I had no idea it was Fang La.”

“Where is the old monk now?”

“I don't know.”

“He must be a saintly person to be so psychic. When I get back to the capital I'm going to report your great deed to the emperor. You'll be able to return to secular life and become an official. Your future wife and children will be honored, you'll be a credit to your ancestors, you'll recompense your parents for their kindness in raising you.”

“I've lost interest in mundane affairs. I don't want to be an official. It will be enough if I can find a quiet place to live out the rest of my life in peace.”

“We'll make you abbot of some big monastery. That also is very honorable. Your parents will be proud of you.”

Sagacious Lu shook his head. “I don't want any part of it. Having a lot of things is no use. Just this flesh on my frame of bones— nothing could be better than that.”

Song Jiang fell silent. Neither he nor Sagacious was happy. The troops were already mustered. Fang La was locked in a cage-cart, to be delivered to the emperor in the Eastern Capital. Song Jiang issued the order and the army left Bangyuan Cavern in Clear Stream County and headed for Muzhou.

In Muzhou Governor Zhang, Deputy District Commander Liu, Chancellor Tong and staff officers Cong and Geng joined forces and made camp. They learned of Song Jiang's great victory, and that he had captured Fang La and brought him to Muzhou. All called to congratulate him. Song Jiang and his chieftains bowed respectfully.

“We've heard that it was an arduous campaign, General, and that brothers have been lost,” said Zhang. “But you've been completely victorious. We're extremely happy.”

Song Jiang again bowed. Weeping, he replied: “There were a hundred and eight of us when we went to break the Liao Tartars, and we returned to the capital intact. Gongsun Sheng left us, and several more remained in the capital. But since conquering Yangzhou and crossing the Yangzi, we've lost seven out of ten. Although I'm still alive, how can I go back to Shandong and face my old neighbors and relations!”

“Don't talk like that, General. You know the old saying: 'Poverty or wealth, high rank or low, short life or long—all are predestined.' Those fortunate enough to live must send off the unfortunates who have died. You have no reason to be ashamed of your losses. You're successful and famous. The emperor will surely reward you with high honors and rank. When you visit home in your official finery you'll be envy of all. Don't concern yourself with incidentals. Just concentrate Oil returning with your army and reporting to His Majesty.”

Bowing his thanks, Song Jiang issued appropriate orders to his chieftains. Governor Zhang directed that, with the exception of Fang La who was to be

delivered to the Eastern Capital, all captured southern officials were to be decapitated in Muzhou's public square.

Officials of counties not yet captured, on learning that Fang La had been taken, either fled or came to Muzhou to surrender and pay their respects to Governor Zhang, in about equal number. The capitulators were accepted and treated as good citizens. Notices, posted everywhere, reassured the populace.

As to the remaining adherents of the southern rebels, if they hadn't harmed anyone and were willing to surrender, they were allowed to return to the countryside and their land and property were restored. With all the counties and prefectures now under control, Song officials and garrisons were placed in charge to defend the territory and protect the people. Everyone resumed his original occupation.

Zhang gave a large banquet in Muzhou to celebrate peace, congratulate his officials and generals, and issue awards. He directed that Song Jiang and Lu Junyi return with their Vanguard Army to the capital. The various units assembled their equipment and got ready to march.

Tears fell from Song Jiang's eyes whenever he thought of the chieftains who had died. Then Zhu Fu and Mu Chun went to visit the six chieftains who were ill in Hangzhou, and they too were stricken. Only Yang Lin and Mu Chun survived and were able to join the march. Today, at last, there was peace, after the many hardships they had been through together, but six poor brothers had passed on.

In a quiet spot in a Muzhou temple Song Jiang had a long banner hung, three hundred and sixty scriptures read, and prayers offered so that the deceased might ascend from the Nine Depths into Heaven. The next day he had steers and horses sacrificed at the Black Dragon Temple in ceremonies which he attended with Wu Yong and the other chieftains. They burned paper replicas of gold and silver ingots as thanks to the Black Dragon Prince for his benevolent protection. Returning to camp. Song Jiang collected the bodies of all the chieftains who had died and gave them proper burial.

The expeditionary army prepared to follow Governor Zhang to Hangzhou, there to await the official imperial decree ordering their return. A list of chieftains who had distinguished themselves was sent to the sovereign with a report. Only thirty-six of the original one hundred and eight were left. They were as follows:

Song Jiang the Defender of Chivalry; Lu Junyi the Jade Unicorn; Wu Yong the Wizard; Guan Sheng the Big Halberd; Lin Chong the Panther Head; Huyan Zhuo the Two Rods; Hua Rong the Lesser Li Guang; Chai Jin the Small Whirlwind; Li Ying the Heaven-Soaring Eagle; Zhu Tong the Beautiful Beard; Sagacious Lu the Tattooed Monk; Wu Song the Pilgrim; Da Zong the Marvelous Traveler; Li Kui the Black Whirlwind; Yang Xiong the Pallid; Li Jun the Turbulent River Dragon; Ruan the Seventh the Devil Incarnate; Yan Qing the Prodigy; Zhu Wu the Miraculous Strategist; Huang Xin the Suppressor of Three Mountains; Sun Li the Sickly General; Fan Rui the Demon King Who Roils the World; Ling Zhen the Heaven-Shaking Thunder; Pei Xuan the Ironclad Virtue; Jiang Jing the Magic Calculator; Du Xing the Demon Face; Song Qing the Iron Fan; Zou Run the One-Horned Dragon; Cai Qing the Single Blossom; Yang Lin the Elegant Panther; Mu Chun the Slightly Restrained; Tong Wei the Dragon from the Cave; Tong Meng the River Churning Clam; Shi Qian the Flea on the Drum; Xun Xin the Junior General and Mistress Gu the Tigress. To the mountain-shaking pounding of drums and gongs, their red victory pennants stretching over a distance of ten *li*, *the* triumphant Vanguard Army left Muzhou. The cavalry rhythmically beat their metal stirrups, the entire force raised their voices in murderous song.

The march to Hangzhou was uneventful. Because Governor Zhang's troops were in the city, Song Jiang camped at Six Harmonies Pagoda. He and his chieftains took quarters in the Six Harmonies Monastery. Song Jiang and Lu Junyi went frequently into Hangzhou while waiting for orders.

Sagacious Lu and Wu Song, quartered in the monastery, relished the beauty of the hills and streams in the outskirts of the city. That night the moon was bright and the breeze cool, the sky and waters an azure blue. The two were asleep in the monastery when, around midnight, they were awakened by the boom of the incoming river tide. Sagacious Lu was from west of the Pass and had never heard this sound before. He thought it was a battle drum, that brigands were again attacking. He leaped from his bed and grabbed his iron staff. With a yell he started to rush outside. The monks were astonished.

“What's wrong, Reverend?” they asked. “Where are you going?”

“I heard a battle drum. I'm going to fight!”

The monks laughed. “You're mistaken, Reverend. That's no battle drum. It's the Old Faithful Tide on our Qiantang River.”

Lu was surprised. “Why do you call it that?”

Opening the window, the monks pointed at the great head of water rolling up the river. “The tide comes in once during the day and once at night, always on time. Today is the fifteenth of the eighth month, and it arrives at the third watch. We call it Old Faithful because it's never late.”

Sagacious peered at the water, then suddenly he understood. He clapped his hands and laughed.

“The prophesy of my old abbot said: 'Take Xia when you encounter him,' and after the fight in the Forest of Ten Thousand Pines I captured Xiahou Cheng. 'Seize La when you meet,' said the abbot, and I've caught Fang La. Now I must fulfil the rest of the prophesy: 'When you hear the ride, round out the circle. When you see the tide, in silence rest.' Well, I've heard the tide and I've seen it, but how do I do the other part? Can you brothers tell me?”

“You've joined the Buddhist order, how is it you don't understand?” said the monks. “In our religious parlance 'to round out the circle and in silence rest' means to die.”

Sagacious laughed. “So that's what it's called. In that case I'll have to round out my circle and rest in silence. Heat a few buckets of water. I must bathe first.”

The monks thought he was joking. But they knew he had a violent temper, and dared not refuse. After Lu had cleansed himself and changed into the fresh monk's clothing presented to him by the emperor, he instructed one of his junior officers.

“Notify brother Song Jiang. Ask him to come here and see me.”

He went into the interior of the temple and wrote an ode on a slip of paper. In the meditation hall, he pulled a hassock to the center, lit some fragrant incense in a burner, and placed the slip of paper on a meditation couch. Then he seated himself cross-legged on the hassock, with his left foot resting on his right and, quite naturally, transcended into space. By the time Song Jiang received the message and hurried with his chieftains to the temple, Sagacious Lu was already motionless. The ode read as follows:

In life I performed no virtuous deeds, preferring murder and arson.

Suddenly my metal shackles were opened, the jade lock shattered.

Hark! The Old Faithful Tide comes on the Qiantang River, and today I know myself at last.

On reading the ode, Song Jiang and Lu Junyi sighed without cease. The chieftains burned incense to the departed Sagacious Lu and kowtowed. Governor Zhang and Chancellor Tong and the other officials hastened from the city and did the same.

Song Jiang distributed the deceased's Buddhist garments and the rewards given to him by the emperor among the monks, and asked them to conduct memorial services for three days and three nights. The body he had put in a

cinnabar red casket and requested the abbot of Jiangshan Monastery to officiate at the cremation. Abbots came also from ten other monasteries to join in the prayers.

Sagacious Lu's remains were cremated behind the Six Harmonies Pagoda. The Jiangshan abbot approached the encoffined body, torch in hand, and pointed at it.

“Sagacious Lu, Sagacious Lu,” he intoned, “you began your career in the greenwood. Arson burned in your eyes, murder festered in your heart. Now you have gone with tide to where none can find you. Amazing! Flying white jade flakes shall fill the sky, the earth shall be covered with yellow gold!”

The abbot lit the pyre, the monks prayed, and flames consumed the casket. Then the bones were collected and interred in the pagoda courtyard. All of Sagacious Lu's extra clothing, money and the contributions he had received from various officials were donated to the Six Harmonies Monastery for the common use of whoever resided there.

Wu Song, though he was still alive, now had only one arm.

“I'm a cripple,” he said to Song Jiang, “and I don't want to go to the capital to be presented to the emperor. I'm giving all my money and awards to Six Harmonies Monastery so that I'll be clean and unencumbered. When you send in the list of those going to the capital, brother, leave my name off.”

“As you wish,” said Song Jiang.

Wu Song became a monk in the Six Harmonies Monastery. He lived to the ripe old age of eighty, but that was later.

Song Jiang went daily into Hangzhou to inquire for news. Governor Zhang and his forces departed first, and Song Jiang moved his troops into the city. Half a month went by and an imperial emissary arrived with an order directing Vanguard General Song to return to the capital with his army. By then Governor Zhang, Chancellor Tong, Deputy District Commander Liu,

staff officers Cong and Geng, Generals Wang and Zhao, and the central forces had all departed for the capital.

When Song Jiang and his army were about to set forth, Lin Chong was unexpectedly stricken by paralysis, Yang Xiong developed a growth on his spine and died, and Shi Qian expired from appendicitis. Song Jiang felt very badly. Then a dispatch arrived from Dantu County saying that Yang Zhi had died and had been buried there. Since Lin Chong's paralysis could not be cured, they left him in Six Harmonies Monastery under Wu Song's care. He passed away half a year later.

Yan Qing the Prodigy approached his former patron Lu Junyi privately after they left Hangzhou.

“I have been with you since childhood,” he said, “and you have been kinder than words can say. Now that we have accomplished our mission, why shouldn't we two give up our official ranks and live out our lives in some secluded place where our fame is unknown?”

“Ever since Liangshan Marsh returned to the fold of the Song Dynasty, we've been going north to subdue the Liao Tartars and south to capture Fang La. They've been bitter costly campaigns in which many of our brothers have been lost. Of my own family, only you and I are left. Now that we shall soon be able to return home in official finery and have honors bestowed on our future wives and children, why should you choose so pointless a course?”

The Prodigy smiled. “You're making a mistake, patron. There is a point to my course. It's your course which probably will turn out badly.”

Yan Qing was a very far-sighted young man.

“I haven't the slightest personal ambition,” Lu protested. “Are you suggesting the imperial court will consider me dangerous?”

“Many famous and loyal heroes of ancient times who contributed much to the founding of new dynasties were executed by their sovereigns.”

“They all committed offenses of one sort or another. I've done nothing wrong. What cause have I for concern?”

“You'll be sorry that you haven't listened to me, but then it will be too late. I was going to bid farewell to General Song Jiang, but he's very strong on fraternity. I'm afraid he wouldn't let me go. So I'll take my leave only of you, patron.”

“Where will you go?”

“Either ahead of or behind you!”

Lu Junyi laughed. “All right, have it your way. Let's see where you end up.”

Yan Qing kowtowed eight times. That night he gathered some money and valuables and departed for a destination unknown. The next morning a note was delivered to Song Jiang. It read:

I, Yan Qing, greet the Vanguard General with the deepest respect. I am extremely grateful for your benevolent teachings. Even my utmost efforts could never repay you. Because of my feeble destiny and weak talents I am not worthy of official honors. I intend to retire to rustic life. I wanted to bid you farewell, but knowing your strong fraternal sentiments I feared you would not let me go, and slipped away in the night Please forgive me. I would like to leave these four lines by way of respectful farewell:

I gladly relinquish official rank,

For wealth and honors I have no need.

Only the amnesty I retain,

With simple fare my life sustain.

The verse struck a chord of melancholy in Song Jiang's heart. He collected the tablets of office of the chieftains who had died and sent them on to the capital, so that the appointments might be cancelled.

Travelling along a winding road, the troops reached the outskirts of Suzhou. Li Jun the Turbulent River Dragon pretended to be stricken with an ailment and took to his bed. The news was reported to Song Jiang, who came personally with a doctor to see him.

“Don't delay the march on my account, brother,” Li Jun pleaded. “The emperor will reproach you. Governor Zhang probably has already been back for some time. Have pity, brother, and leave Tong Wei and Tong Meng to look after me. We'll catch up and attend the imperial court as soon as I am well again. You hurry on to the capital with the army.”

Though reluctant, Song Jiang could not procrastinate. Zhang was sending dispatches urging speed. Li Jun and the two Tong brothers were left behind, and Song Jiang and his chieftains rode on.

Li Jun and the Tong brothers then sought out Fei Bao and the three other rustic friends, and the seven conferred in Willow Hamlet. They disposed of their family possessions, built a ship and set sail from the port of Taicang for foreign parts. Li Jun eventually became king of Siam. Tong Wei and Fei Bao also became officials in a foreign land, each occupying coastal territory and doing as he pleased. But that was all in Li Jun's later history.

The march of the Song troops was uneventful. Song Jiang's heart was heavy when they traversed Changzhou and Runzhou, where the had fought costly battles. Only two or three out of ten of his chieftains remained since crossing the Yangzi. The army passed Yangzhou and entered Huai'an. The capital wasn't far away. Song Jiang ordered the chieftains to get ready to be received by the emperor.

They reached the Eastern Capital on the twentieth day of the ninth month. Governor Zhang and his forces entered the city first. Song Jiang's men camped at their old site in the outskirts, Chen Bridge Station, and waited for orders.

A count of the chieftains showed a total of twenty-seven, including Song Jiang. Of these, only twelve were senior officers. He wrote out a list of those who had died for their country to present to the emperor, and instructed his remaining chieftains to prepare suitable attire for attending the imperial court. Three days later, they received the emperor's summons.

That morning at daybreak the twenty-seven rode into the city. This was the third time the capital's populace had seen the chieftains arrive for a reception by the Taoist Sovereign. The first was when they were granted the imperial amnesty. They were garbed in the silks of red and green given to them by the emperor then, and wore tablets of silver and gold. The second time, on their return to the capital after defeating the Liao Tartars, they were dressed in armor. Today, on His Majesty's orders, they wore civilian robes and headgear. The watching crowds sighed in admiration.

At the palace gate, the twenty-seven dismounted and entered. They kowtowed eight times at the foot of the vermilion jade stairs, then retreated and kowtowed another eight times, then advanced to midway between the two positions and kowtowed eight times more. Their twenty-four obeisances raised a cloud of dust, and their cries of “Long live!” shook the air.

Emperor Hui Zong saw how drastically their numbers had been depleted, and his heart was moved. He summoned them into the hall. With Song Jiang and Lu Junyi in the lead they mounted the golden stairs and knelt before the jewel-encrusted curtain. The sovereign instructed them to rise. By then his ministers had rolled up the curtain.

“We have heard of your hardships in the punitive expedition across the Yangzi, and that you have lost more than half your brothers,” said the emperor. “We feel very badly about that.”

Song Jiang, weeping, remained on his knees. “Because I am only a crude talentless rustic, I can never repay Your Majesty's kindness, though I spill my liver and brains on the battlefield! There were a hundred and eight of us when we pledged brotherhood in the Wutai Mountains. Who would have thought we'd lose eight out of ten! I have a list here, Your Majesty, which I

hesitate to present. I pray that in your benevolence, Sire, you will make a suitable disposition."

"We shall honor the graves of those who died for the throne. Their contribution shall not be forgotten."

Song Jiang again bowed and submitted his petition. It read:

Vanguard General and Commander-in-Chief of the Pacification of the South Song Jiang and others respectfully report: Though ignorant and crude and having committed heinous crimes, we have been the recipients of Your Majesty's kindness, for which we can never repay though our bones be ground to powder and our bodies pulverized. We and our brothers, on leaving the Marsh, have done our utmost to eradicate evil. Of one mind, we vowed fraternity on Mount Wutai, and have been defending our country and protecting the people with full loyalty ever since. In Youzhou we defeated the Liao Tartars, near the cavern in Clear Stream we captured Fang La.

In making these modest contributions, we have lost many excellent commanders. For this we grieve night and day. We pray Your Majesty will consider the matter and bestow your benevolence on those who have died and your protection on those who still live.

Our only wish is to return to the countryside and till the land. We beseech you, Sire, to allow us to retire. Earnest and trembling, we await Your Majesty's decision with bowed heads. The following is a list of our commanders...

The itemization showed that fifty-nine had been killed in battle, ten died of illness, one expired in a religious trance, one was crippled and became a monk at Six Harmonies Monastery, another was a Taoist who returned to Qizhou, four had gone off on their own, five had remained in or returned to the capital, and twenty-seven now presented themselves before the throne.

The petition was signed by Vanguard General Song Jiang and Vice-Vanguard General Lu Junyi.

“One hundred and eight of you, all stars in the firmament,” the emperor sighed, “and only twenty-seven left after another four departed! You literally have lost eight out of ten!”

He bestowed posthumous titles on those who had died. If they had surviving sons, he called them to the capital and gave them official posts. If they had none, he had temples built where sacrifices might be dedicated to their memories. Because Zhang Shun's spirit had performed deeds of conspicuous value, it was named a Golden Glory General. Sagacious Lu, for having captured Fang La and transcending from life in a trance, was named the Chivalrous Illustrious Reverend. Wu Song was made abbot of the Six Harmonies Monastery, where he lived out his days. Ten Feet of Steel and Mother Sun, who had died in battle, were also given honorific posthumous tides.

The ten senior chieftains present at the imperial ceremony were made prefects or prefectural or district military commanders. The fifteen lieutenant chieftains were given command of various army units. All were to await formal certification by the appropriate departments. Mistress Gu was appointed magistrate of Dongyuan County.

Song Jiang was entitled Marshal of Military Virtue and made governor of Chuzhou Prefecture and commander of its armed forces.

Lu Junyi was entitled Marshal of Military Contribution and made governor of Luzhou Prefecture and deputy commander of its armed forces.

His Majesty also presented the fifteen lieutenant chieftains with three hundred ounces of gold and silver and five sets of silken clothing each. For each of the ten senior chieftains the gift was five hundred ounces of gold and silver and eight sets of the silken clothing. Song Jiang and Lu Junyi were each awarded one thousand ounces of gold and silver, ten sets of silken clothing, an imperial court robe, and a fine horse.

All thanked the sovereign.

The spirit of the Black Dragon Prince had twice manifested itself in Muzhou, defended the country and the people, and enabled the army to win complete victory. The emperor bestowed on the Black Prince a long and magniloquent title. He also changed the names of Muzhou to Yanzhou, and Shezhou to Huizhou, because these had been seats of Fang La's rebellion.

Clear Stream County became, for the same reason, Chunan County, and Bangyuan Cavern was split away from the rest of the peninsula to form an island in the river. The prefect of Muzhou was directed to use money from his treasury to erect a temple for the Black Dragon Prince, and the emperor personally sent a name plaque. The building still stands to this day.

South of the Yangzi Fang La's depredations had been severe. His Majesty exempted the people there from all taxes and labor levies for the next three years.

Each of the chieftains thanked the monarch. He invited them to an imperial feast to celebrate the peace and to congratulate them on their achievements. Civil and military officials of the highest rank entered the banquet hall. When it was over, Song Jiang addressed the sovereign.

“Since receiving the amnesty in Liangshan Marsh, we've lost more than half our troops. Some wish to return home. We pray, Sire, that you exercise your benevolence.”

The emperor decreed as follows: Those who wished to remain in the army would be given a hundred strings of cash, ten bolts of silk and be assigned to either the Fierce Dragon or the Imposing Tiger Camp, where they would receive monthly stipends of money and grain. Those who wished to leave would be given two hundred strings of cash, ten bolts of silk, and be permitted to return home and be civilians again.

“I was born in Yuncheng County,” said Song Jiang, “but since committing my crimes I have not dared to go back. Pray grant me permission, Sire, to sweep my family graves and visit my relatives and neighbors. I will then go to Chuzhou and assume office.”

Very pleased, the monarch presented him with ten thousand strings of cash for maintaining his ancestral manor. Song Jiang and the chieftains, again expressing their gratitude, took leave of the sovereign and withdrew.

The next day the Council of Administration gave a banquet to celebrate peace, to which all the chieftains were invited. The day after, the Council of Military Affairs did the same. Governor Zhang, Deputy District Commander Liu, Chancellor Tong, staff officers Cong and Geng, and Generals Wang and Zhao were all raised in rank. But that is not part of our story.

On the recommendation of the Military Procurate, and in accordance with an imperial decree, Fang La was sliced to bits and beheaded in a public square of the Eastern Capital, and the remains placed on display for three days.

Song Jiang and his brother Song Qing left the capital with a company of one or two hundred soldiers who carried their chieftains' luggage and awards. The return to Shandong Province was without incident.

On reaching their native village in Yuncheng County, they were welcomed by neighbors and relations, but when they arrived at the manor they found that their lather, the old squire, had died, and that he was still lying in his coffin. The two brothers wept heartbrokenly. They were deeply grieved. Family and vassals offered condolences.

The old squire had kept the manor's farm and property in excellent condition. Song Jiang was able to concentrate on making funeral arrangements. He hired monks and priests to offer prayers for his departed parents and ancestors. Officials from county and prefecture called without cease.

A propitious day was chosen and, with the brothers serving as pallbearers, the squire's body was carried to a high plateau and laid to rest. Prefectural officials, neighbors and elders, friends and family, all attended. Of that we'll say no more.

Song Jiang thought of the Mystic Queen of Ninth Heaven, and recalled that he had not yet shown his gratitude. He paid artisans fifty thousand strings of cash to build her a temple. Soon it was completed —with two covered walks, a mountain gate, a statue of the Mystic Queen, and painted decorations.

Afraid that if he stayed too long in the countryside the emperor would reproach him, Song Jiang selected a date for the removal of his mourning vestments and again had several days of prayer services conducted. Then he gave a farewell feast for neighbors and village elders. The following day his relations gave him a banquet to congratulate him and demonstrate their affection. Of that we'll say no more.

Song Jiang entrusted the affairs of the manor to his brother. Although Song Qing had also been made an official, Song Jiang instructed him to remain at home, attend to the farm, and maintain the family shrine. What money he still had with him he distributed among the people.

But to put idle chatter aside, after several months at home Song Jiang left his native village and returned to the Eastern Capital. Many of his brother chieftains had fetched their families and settled down. Some had already assumed office. Families of those who had died for the throne went back to their villages with the bonuses the emperor had bestowed upon them.

Song Jiang gradually dispersed his army. Soon the families of the slain had all departed. Those appointed to office bid farewell to the various ministers and left to take up their duties.

Dai Zong the Marvellous Traveller came to see Song Jiang. As they sat and chatted, Dai told him something.

And as a result Song Jiang the hero of Yuncheng County became the ghost of Liao Er Flats. His name was recorded in history for thousands of years, his deeds were inscribed for centuries.

Truly, his splendid spirit pervaded his temple, and his picture was hung in the Imperial Hall of Fame.

What were the words which Dai Zong spoke to Song Jiang? Read our next chapter if you would know.

Chapter 100
Song Jiang's Ghost Haunts Liao Er Flats
Emperor Hui Zong Dreams of Liangshan Marsh

Dai Zong rose and said to Song Jiang: “The emperor in his benevolence has appointed me prefect of Yanzhou. Today I intend to submit my resignation and leave for the Sacred Mountain Temple in Tai'an Prefecture where I shall become a Taoist priest and live out my life in tranquility.”

“Why do you take this course of action, brother?”

“I had a dream that the Summoner to the Nether World was calling me. So I made up my mind.”

“You have that marvellous ability to travel quickly, brother. You'll surely become a spirit of the district after you die.”

They parted. Dai Zong resigned his post, went to the Sacred Mountain Temple, and became a Taoist priest. Every day he burned incense and diligently prayed for the Emperor of Heaven. Though he was not ill, several months later he bid farewell to his fellow priests and died, smiling cheerfully. His spirit appeared in the temple frequently after that. Worshippers set up a statue of him in the temple, using his original skeleton as the framework.

Ruan the Seventh, when he received his appointment, took leave of Song Jiang and assumed office as commandant of the Gaitian Military District. In the next few months, Generals Wang Bing and Zhao Tang, remembering how he had insulted them at Bangyuan Cavern, frequently complained about him to Chancellor of Military Affairs Tong.

“He put on Fang La's royal garments and jade girdle. Though it was only a joke at the time, it's still on his mind,” they said. They wanted to have him killed. “That Gaitian Military District is a secluded place, and the people there are savage,” they said. “He's sure raise a rebellion.”

Tong told Premier Cai Jing, who reported to the emperor and requested an order canceling Ruan the Seventh's appointment and reducing him to ordinary civilian status.

No one was more pleased than Ruan when the decree was issued. He returned with his old mother to Stone Tablet Village in Liangshan Marsh and became a fisherman again. Ruan supported the old lady for the rest of her days. He himself later died at the age of sixty.

Chai Jin the Small Whirlwind, in the capital, noted that Dai Zong had resigned his post and become a priest. He learned, too, that the imperial court had removed Ruan the Seventh from office and reduced him to an ordinary citizen on the theory that because he had worn Fang La's royal vestments he probably wanted to rebel.

“I was a duke consort under Fang La,” Chai Jin said to himself. “If those evil ministers find out and slander me before the emperor, won't I be dismissed and humiliated also? It would be better if I took the initiative and saved myself the trouble.”

Claiming that he could not function efficiently because of recurring bouts of rheumatism, he asked to resign and return to his farms. Permission was granted. He bid farewell to the officials and went back to his estate in Henghai District, Cangzhou Prefecture, where he lived a life of ease. One day, though in perfect health, he suddenly passed away.

Li Ying served as commandant of Zhongshan District for half a year, when he heard of Chai Jin's retirement. He too claimed inability to serve due to rheumatism. He resigned and returned to his village of Lone Dragon Mountain. Later he joined up with Du Xiang, and they became rich. Both came to a good end.

Guan Sheng, commandant of the Darning garrison in the Northern Capital, won the respect of his troops and the local populace. One day, returning drunk from military maneuvers, he fell from his horse and took ill and died.

Huyan Zhuo, who had been appointed a commander of the Imperial Guards, drilled his men every day. In later years he led an army against the Fourth

Prince of the Golden Tartars. He was killed in battle west of the Huai River.

Zhu Tong performed well as commandant of the garrison at Baoding. Later he fought under General Liu Guangshi against the Golden Tartars, and ended his days as governor of the Taiping Military District.

Hua Rong assumed office as prefect of Yingtian, where he went with his wife and younger sister. Wu Yong, who was unmarried, took charge in the Wusheng Military District, where he arrived accompanied only by a boy servant. Li Kui, also unmarried, had just two servants with him when he assumed office in Runzhou Prefecture.

Why do we tell of these latter three only up until the time they commenced their official duties, but reveal the final fate of the previously mentioned seven? That is because the seven do not appear again in our story. As to the other five senior chieftains—Song Jiang, Lu Junyi, Wu Yong, Hua Rong and Li Kui—we shall be hearing more of them.

Regarding the fifteen lieutenant chieftains, aside from Song Qing who was already at home, Du Xing also returned to the countryside to join Li Ying. Huang Xin assumed office in Qingzhou. Sun Li, with his brother Sun Xin and sister-in-law Mistress Gu, plus his own wife and children, resumed their former jobs in Dengzhou. Zou Run had no desire to become an official and went back to the Mountain in the Clouds.

Cai Qing returned with Guan Sheng to the Northern Capital as an ordinary citizen. Pei Xuan and Yang Lin, after talking it over, returned to Horse Watering Valley and retired. Jiang Jing, missing his old home, went back to Tanzhou as a plain civilian. Zhu Wu had been learning Taoist lore from Fan Rui for some time and, like him, became a Taoist priest. Together, they roamed the land, finally joining the temple of Gongsun Sheng, where they lived out their days.

Mu Chun returned to civilian life in Jieyang Town. Ling Zhen the remarkable cannoneer was appointed to the Imperial Explosives Bureau. Doctor An Daoquan became a senior physician in the capital's Imperial Hospital. Huangfu Duan was given charge of the Imperial Stables. Jin Dajian was already an official of the Imperial Treasury. Xiao Rang was

named tutor in the Residence of Premier Cai. Yue Ho remained in the palace of Prince Consort Wang, where he lived out his days in ease and contentment. Of these we'll say no more.

Song Jiang and Lu Junyi, after parting, left to take up their respective posts. Lu Junyi, who had no family, proceeded to Luzhou accompanied by a few travelling companions. Song Jiang bid farewell to the emperor and his ministers and departed for Chuzhou with several family servants.

From then on, each of the chieftains went his separate way. We'll say no more of that either.

When Tai Zong succeeded Tai Zu the first Song emperor he proclaimed his aims, but in the end he couldn't see through the deception being practiced upon him. Hui Zong the present sovereign was clairvoyant and wise, but corrupt ministers managed to gain control under him as well, to the detriment of the virtuous and loyal. It was a great pity. Cai Jing, Tong Guan, Gao Qiu and Yang Jian created wide confusion and harmed the country and the people sorely.

The high honors and substantial rewards given to Song Jiang and his chieftains profoundly disturbed Marshals Gao and Yang. They conferred about it.

“Song Jiang and Lu Junyi are our enemies,” said Gao. “Now they've been made high officials and honored by the imperial court. Swinging into the saddle they command armies, dismounting they rule the population. We ministers have become a laughing stock! We must remember the old saying: 'Gentlemen scorn the timid, heroes must be ruthless.'”

“I have a plan,” said Yang. “We'll get rid of Lu Junyi first. It will be like cutting off Song's right arm. The man's tremendously brave. If we dealt with Song first and Lu found out he'd surely turn on us and create a very bad situation.”

“Let's hear your plan.”

“Have a couple of Luzhou military men complain to the ministry that Lu is raising an army and storing up grain and fodder with the intent to revolt. We'll take them to the premier and they'll ask him to report this to the emperor. Premier Cai will carry through the deception and request the emperor to invite Lu to the palace. When His Majesty entertains him at an imperial feast, we'll slip some mercury into his food. It will lodge in his kidneys and he'll be incapacitated. He won't be able to do anything of any importance. Then we can send an emissary to Song Jiang with imperial wine in which we'll have put a slow-working poison. In half a month he'll be beyond saving.”

“An excellent idea,” said Gao. The two wicked ministers dispatched a confidant to fetch two local men from Luzhou. They wrote out a complaint for them and sent them to the Council of Military Affairs. The complaint alleged that Lu Junyi was raising an army in Luzhou and storing fodder and grain in preparation for a revolt, also that he was in constant touch with Song Jiang in Chuzhou and kept him informed of his scheme.

Tong Guan the Chancellor of Military Affairs also hated Song Jiang. He accepted the complaint and relayed it to the office of the premier. Cai read it and summoned the others to a conference. Gao and Yang proposed that the accusers be brought directly before the emperor. This was done.

“When Song Jiang and Lu Junyi smashed the Liao Tartars, and later when they captured Fang La, they had hundreds of thousands of soldiers under their command, yet they showed no indication of wicked ideas,” said the sovereign. “Now that they have taken the path of virtue, would they leave it and return evil for good, revolt even? I have never wronged them. Why should they rebel against the throne? There's something fishy here. I don't believe it.”

“Your Majesty talks of loyal love,” said Gao and Yang. “But a man's heart is hard to fathom. Lu Junyi probably considers his rank too low. He's not satisfied and wants to rebel. Fortunately, people have discovered it.”

“I shall call him before me and get at the facts personally.”

Cai and Tong had a suggestion. “Lu Junyi is a wild beast. He's difficult to control,” they said. “If he's startled he'll become suspicious. That will make things very awkward. It won't be easy to catch him. Why not invite him to dine, Sire? In the course of conversation Your Majesty can feel out his real intentions. If there's nothing to it, we can forget the whole thing. He'll think inviting him is just a sign that Your Majesty doesn't forget his meritorious officials.”

The emperor agreed. He sent an emissary with a summons to Lu Junyi to appear at the imperial court for an assignment. When the emissary arrived at Luzhou, officials came out of the city to greet him. They escorted him to the prefectural office, where he read the document.

To skip the petty details, Lu immediately rode back to the capital with the emissary. He rested in quarters outside the palace. Early the next morning, he waited at the East Glory Gate for the imperial audience to commence. Premier Cai Jing, Chancellor of Military Affairs Tong Guan, Marshals Gao Qiu and Yang Jian escorted Lu Junyi before the monarch. When obeisances were completed, the sovereign spoke.

“I wished to see you again. Are you comfortable in Luzhou?”

“Thanks to Your Majesty's fortunate emanations, the army and populace are all peaceful.”

The emperor chatted with Lu until nearly noon. The Master of the Imperial Chefs announced that lunch for the traveller was ready if the monarch wished him to dine. Gao and Yang had already placed mercury in the food which was set upon the table. The emperor directed the Chef Master to serve Lu Junyi. Lu bowed to the sovereign and ate.

“You must look after our troops in Luzhou well,” the emperor admonished. “We don't want anything to happen.”

Lu Junyi respectfully expressed his thanks and left for Luzhou. He had no inkling of what the four wicked ministers were plotting.

“We'll soon see important results,” Gao and Yang exulted.

Starting the return trip, Lu felt a pain in his back and a general weakness. He couldn't ride a horse, so he took a boat. After several days on the Huai River, they reached Sizhou Prefecture. There, something happened. Lu had been drinking that night, and he insisted on standing on the prow. By then the mercury had seeped not only into his kidneys but into his bones as well. He was unable to stand firmly, and his drunkenness made him stumble. Lu fell into the Huai River and drowned.

Poor Jade Unicorn of Hebei, to become a wronged ghost in the watery kingdom! His body was fished out, encoffined in Sizhou, and buried on high ground. The local officials wrote a report to the imperial ministries.

When the four plotters received the news, they reported to the emperor: “Sizhou notifies us that Lu Junyi fell into the Huai and drowned. Song Jiang is sure to become suspicious. He may start something. We suggest Your Majesty send an emissary with imperial wine as a mark of sympathy and calm him down.”

The monarch thought for some time. If he didn't agree, he wasn't sure what Song Jiang's reaction would be. Yet if he did agree, he had a feeling Song Jiang might be harmed. But he could see no other alternative. In the end he let himself be persuaded by the lies and deceptions of the four wicked ministers. He directed an emissary to take two bottles of imperial wine to Chuzhou.

It happened that the man was a trusted crony of Gao and Yang. Fate had determined the day when Song Jiang must die, but who would have thought that the four would be the instrument of his demise! They put a slow-working poison in the wine and directed the emissary to go directly to Chuzhou and deliver it.

After Song Jiang assumed the governorship of Chuzhou and command of the local troops, he was solicitous of the welfare of both the soldiers and the people. The populace loved him like a parent, the troops adored him. He was lenient in his judgments, wise in his administration. The people willingly obeyed him, he had the respect of all.

He enjoyed walking outside the city's South Gate, where there was an area called Liao Er Flats. It was laced with waterways and in the center was a tall beautiful mountain thickly covered with pine and cypress. Its scenic loveliness reminded him of Mount Liangshan and its surrounding marsh. Though smaller, it had the same peaks and winding paths, the same swelling heights like crouching dragons and tigers, the same abrupt cliffs, stairways and terraces, the same streams everywhere, and lakes front and rear.

The place gave him much pleasure, and he said to himself: “When I die, this is where I'd like to be buried.” Whenever he was free, it was here he wandered, happy and relaxed.

During the first ten days of summer in the sixth year of Xuan Ho, half a year after he took office, Song Jiang heard that an emissary had arrived from the capital with imperial wine. Accompanied by other officials, he went out of the city to welcome him and escort him in. In the public hall the emissary read the emperor's greeting, presented the wine and urged Song Jiang to drink. When Song Jiang requested the emissary to join him, the man refused, saying he was a teetotaler. Song Jiang ceremoniously drank and the emissary returned to the capital. He would not accept the gift which Song Jiang offered.

Song Jiang's stomach began to pain him soon after, and he suspected something had been added to the wine. He quickly made inquires and learned the emissary had in fact done some drinking while stopping at a hostel for officials along the road. Song Jiang realized he had been tricked. He was positive the wine had been poisoned by the evil ministers. He sighed.

“Since childhood I studied Confucianism, and when I grew up I learned how to be a minor official. Unfortunately I became involved in crime, but I never had the slightest desire to rebel. Now the emperor listens to deceitful ministers and sends me poisoned wine! What have I done to deserve this! It doesn't matter if I die, but Li Kui, who is today the commandant of Runzhou, will certainly take to the hills again when he hears about this dirty trick the imperial court has played. That will ruin the reputation of loyalty

to the emperor I have sought so diligently all my life! There's only one thing I can do."

He dispatched a man that same night to Runzhou with a message to Li Kui to come to Chuzhou immediately.

Black Whirlwind Li Kui was morose and depressed ever since becoming commandant of Runzhou. All day long he drank with his companions. That was the only thing he enjoyed. When he received the message from Song Jiang he said to himself: "Big Brother has sent for me. It must be important." He embarked by boat at once with an aide. On reaching Chuzhou he went directly to Song Jiang in the prefecture.

"From the time we broke up I've done nothing but think of you brothers," said Song. "Wu Yong is in the far-off Wusheng Military District. Hua Rong is in Yingtian, but I haven't had any news of him. Only you, brother, are relatively near. So I've asked you to come and discuss a very serious matter."

"What is it, Big Brother?"

"First have some wine."

Song Jiang escorted Black Whirlwind into a rear hall, where wine and a goblet was waiting. Li Kui drank for some time until he was half intoxicated.

"I must tell you, brother," said Song. "I hear the imperial court is sending me poisoned wine. If I die what will you do?"

"Rebel, brother," Li Kui shouted. "Let's rebel!"

"Our army is gone, our brothers are scattered. How can we rebel?"

"I've got three thousand men in Zhenjiang, you have soldiers here in Chuzhou. We'll muster them, and as many of the local people we can get to join us, raise more troops, buy horses, and fight! We'll be happy back in

Liangshan Marsh. At least we won't have to take any more crap from those rascally ministers!”

“Slowly, brother. We must talk this over.”

Black Whirlwind of course didn't know that the wine he imbibed contained a slow poison. That night he drank more. The next day Song Jiang saw him off to his boat.

“When will you start your revolt, brother?” Li Kui asked. “I'll come with my troops and reinforce you.”

“Brother, don't blame me!” said Song Jiang. “The emperor sent me some poisoned wine the other day, and I drank it. I'm going to die soon. All my life I've tried to adhere to two principles—loyalty and righteousness. I would never practice deceit. Now, though I am innocent, the imperial court is causing my death. But I'd rather the emperor wronged me than wrong the emperor.

“I was afraid that after I died you would rebel and spoil our reputation for loyalty and righteousness, earned while acting in Heaven's behalf in Liangshan Marsh. And so I asked you here and gave you the poisoned wine also. When you return to Runzhou you'll surely die.

“After you've expired, come to Liao Er Flats, outside Chuzhou's South Gate. It's a beautiful place, and looks just like Liangshan Marsh. Our spirits can meet there. That's where I'm going to be buried after I die. I've already decided!” As he spoke, Song Jiang's tears fell like rain.

Li Kui also wept. “Enough, enough, enough!” he cried. “I took care of you in life, Big Brother, and I'll be a minor ghost and serve you after death as well!”

His body felt heavy. Weeping, he bid Song Jiang farewell and boarded his craft. When he reached Runzhou, sure enough, the poison activated.

As Black Whirlwind lay dying, he instructed his attendants: “After I'm gone you absolutely must take my coffin to Liao Er Flats outside Chuzhou's

South Gate and bury me beside Big Brother.” Later, his orders were carried out.

Song Jiang felt very badly when Li Kui sailed away that day. He thought of Wu Yong and Hua Rong, and sorrowed that he'd never see them again. The poison began to work during the night. On his deathbed he said to his trusted followers: “You must fulfil my request. Bury me on high ground above Liao Er Flats. Your virtuous conduct will certainly be rewarded. Promise that you will.” So saying, he died.

His followers prepared to bury him in Chuzhou, according to ceremony. The prefectural officials, informed of his request, agreed to honor it. Together with his intimates, functionaries young and old carried his coffin to a place above Liao Er Flats and buried him there. A few days later, the coffin of Li Kui was brought from Runzhou. His associates kept their word and interred him next to Song Jiang.

Song Qing was ill at home. A member of the family returning from Chuzhou informed him that his brother Song Jiang had passed away there. Qing was too sick to attend the funeral, but he sent a family member to conduct a sacrificial ceremony at Liao Er Flats and arrange for the grave to be kept in order.

As for Wu Yong, he was not happy either after assuming office. He thought constantly of the affection between Song Jiang and himself. Suddenly, one day he felt very depressed and uneasy. That night Song Jiang and Li Kui came to him in a dream and tugged at his clothes.

“We always put loyalty and righteousness above all, acting on Heaven's behalf and never wronging the emperor,” they said. “But the imperial court sent us poisoned wine and, though blameless, we died. We're buried in Liao Er Flats outside Chuzhou's South Gate. If you still remember the old days come and visit our graves.”

Wu Yong was about to ask questions when he suddenly awakened. It had been only a dream. But his tears fell like rain, and he sat up in bed until daylight.

The next day he packed some belongings and hurried, alone, to Chuzhou. When he got there he learned that Song Jiang indeed was dead. There wasn't a person he spoke to who didn't sigh. He went to Liao Er Hats, swept the graves, and sacrificed to the spirits of Song Jiang and Li Kui. Beating his hand on Song Jiang's grave mound, he wept.

“Your spirit is not yet gone, brother, hear what I say! I was a village school teacher. First I followed Chao Gai, then I met you, brother, and you saved my life. We shared honors together for several decades, all thanks to your virtue. Now you have died for our country and appeared to me in a dream. I still haven't repaid your kindness, brother. I shall be glad to take the dream as an omen and join you in the Nether World.”

Wu Yong wept bitterly. He decided to hang himself. Just then Hua Rong, who had arrived in Chuzhou by boat, came rushing to the grave. He was startled to see Wu Yong.

“I thought you were an official in Yingtian,” said Wu Yong. “How did you hear about Big Brother's demise?”

“Ever since we broke up I've never felt easy in my mind. I kept thinking of all of our brothers. The other night Song Jiang and Li Kui came to me in a dream and said they had been killed by poisoned imperial wine and were buried above Liao Er Flats. They said if I hadn't forgotten the old days I must visit their graves. I dropped everything and travelled day and night to get here.”

“I had the same dream and came for the same reason. Nothing could be better than our meeting here today. I've been thinking—I can never repay brother Song Jiang for all he's done for me, and I can't bear to part with him. I'm going to hang myself here so that our spirits can be together, and as a demonstration of my loyal and righteous heart.”

“Since that's how you feel, General, I'll join you,” said Hua Rong, “and show my devotion to Big Brother as well.”

“I was hoping that after my death you'd bury me here,” said Wu Yong. “How is it that you want to do the same thing?”

“I hate to part with Big Brother, and I can't forget his kindness. In Liangshan Marsh we were major criminals, but luckily we survived. We fought in battle after battle as bold gallants together. Then the emperor amnestied us, and we marched on expeditions north and south, distinguishing ourselves by our valor. Today, we're known throughout the land. But the imperial court suspects us. They're bound to be watching us for 'offenses.' If they trump up charges and have us executed, regrets will be too late. I'd rather go with you to the Nether World. I will at least leave a clean name and my body will be given proper burial.”

“Listen to me, brother, I'm alone, without any dependants. It doesn't matter if I die. But you have a young son and a sweet wife. What will they do?”

“There won't be any problem. I've left them a bit, enough to feed themselves. Besides, my wife's family will look after them.”

The two men wept together, then hung themselves from a tree.

On Hua Rong's boat his attendants became concerned when, after a long time, their master failed to return. They went to the graves and found him and Wu Yong dead. Hastily, they reported to the local officials, obtained coffins, and buried the two beside Song Jiang's grave. The burial mounds were like four hills.

Moved by Song Jiang's virtue and righteous loyalty, the people of Chuzhou erected a shrine to his memory. They offered sacrifices the year round, and none of their prayers were unanswered.

Meanwhile in the Eastern Capital, the Taoist Sovereign had been uneasy ever since sending Song Jiang the imperial wine. Though he had no news, he thought of him frequently. But Gao Qiu and Yang Jian constantly diverted him with talk of pleasurable pursuits. They wanted only to block off the righteous and injure the loyal.

Then, one day, while amusing himself in the palace, the monarch suddenly recalled his mistress Shishi. Accompanied by two young eunuchs, he went

through the tunnel to her rear garden and pulled the bell cord.

The girl hurried out and received him. She led him to the bedroom and asked him to be seated. The emperor ordered that all the gates, front and rear, be bolted. The girl adorned herself formally and proffered respectful obeisances.

“I've been slightly unwell lately,” said the sovereign, “but Dr. An Daoquan has cured me. It's been months since we've met, beloved, but you've been always on my mind.. Seeing you again makes me very happy.”

“I'm unworthy of your affection, Sire.” The girl laid out wine and delicacies for the ruler's delectation.

After only a few cups, he felt very sleepy. The lamps flickered and a chill breeze blew through the room. He saw standing before him a figure in a yellow robe.

“Who are you?” asked the startled monarch. “Why are you here?”

“I am Dai Zong the Marvellous Traveller, a lieutenant of Song Jiang of Liangshan Marsh.”

“What brings you to this place?”

“Brother Song Jiang is nearby. He requests that Your Majesty come with me.”

“Where do you wish to take me?”

“To a place that's pure and fair. Please come, Sire.”

The emperor rose and walked with Dai Zong to the rear garden. A horse stood waiting. The monarch mounted and they were off. Travelling through cloud and mist, he could hear the sound of wind and rain. At last they arrived.

All around were misty waters and cloud-obscured heights. Neither the sun nor moon could be seen, the sky and water were of one color. Liao Er Flats

was a riot of red smartweed and green reed leaves. Waterfowl gambolled on stony beaches, mandarin ducks and drakes rested in pairs beside ponds of lotus. On the wooded slopes frost had turned the leaves to ten thousand scales of a fiery dragon, dew on the dykes glistened like the golden eyes of countless savage beasts. Gradually, a pale moon and a few scattered stars appeared in the night sky. It was autumn, and the breeze was chill and the dew icy.

The emperor couldn't gaze enough at the beautiful scene. “What is this place?” he queried. “Where are you taking me?”

Dai Zong pointed to a pass on the top of a mountain. “You'll soon know, Sire. There's where we go.”

They climbed the slope, passing through three fortified passes. Before the third, more than a hundred men prostrated themselves by the roadside. All were armed, and wore helmets and armor of gold. The monarch was astonished.

“Who are these people?”

The first of them, plumes flying from his golden helmet, stepped forward and said: “I am Song Jiang of Liangshan Marsh.”

“I appointed you governor of Chuzhou. What are you doing here?”

“Please come to Loyalty Hall, Your Majesty, and I will tell you all about my wrongful demise.”

At the hall the emperor got down from his horse, entered the building and was seated. He saw many people kowtowing in the mist outside.

The monarch couldn't understand. Song Jiang mounted the steps and knelt, tears streaming down his face.

“Why do you weep?” asked the sovereign.

“Although I at one time fought against the imperial troops, I was always loyal to Your Majesty and never had a seditious thought. After the amnesty,

I drove back the Liao Tartars in the north and captured Fang La in the south, at the cost of eight out of ten of my brothers, who were like my arms and legs. In keeping with your decree, Sire, I took office in Chuzhou. I never squeezed a penny from the army or the people. Heaven and Earth knew the purity of my heart. Your Majesty sent me poisoned wine and I drank it. I died with no regrets."

"But I was afraid Li Kui would be angry, and rebel. So I summoned him from Runzhou and killed him with the poisoned wine. Wu Yong and Hua Rong visited my grave and hung themselves out of chivalry. We four are buried above Liao Er Flats outside of Chuzhou's South Gate. Pitying us, the villagers have built a shrine there. But although we are dead, our souls will not depart. We have remained to inform Your Majesty of our unwavering fidelity and to beg you to determine the justice of the matter."

The monarch was amazed. "I sent an emissary with sealed imperial vintage. Who could have substituted poisoned wine?"

"Ask your emissary. Then you'll know which treacherous scoundrels were behind it!"

Gazing around at the magnificent citadel and its three fortified passes, the emperor was impressed. "What is this place?"

"Liangshan Marsh, Sire, where we dwelt in the old days."

"Although you have passed on, you will be reincarnated as men again. Why do you congregate here?"

"The Jade Emperor of Heaven, moved by my righteous loyalty, designated me Deity of Liangshan Marsh. Since this is my domain, my chieftains have joined me. We sent Dai Zong, the Marvellous Traveller to bring you, Emperor of Ten Thousand Carriages, to our marsh, so that we might state our grievances and assure you personally of our devotion."

"But why didn't you appear to me in my inner palace?"

“I am a spirit of the Nether World. How could I appear amid imperial splendor? Today you left your palace, so we were able to invite you.”

“I've been sitting a long time. Is it possible for me to look around?”

Song Jiang bowed and conducted him from the building. The sovereign noted the plaque above the entrance. It read, in large letters, *Loyalty Hall.* He nodded and descended the steps. Suddenly, from behind Song Jiang, Li Kui appeared, battle-axes in hand.

“Emperor, emperor!” he cried in a terrible voice. “How could you believe your four deceitful ministers and wrongfully destroy us? Today we've met and I can take vengeance!” Brandishing his axes, he rushed at the monarch.

Startled, the sovereign awoke. It had all been a dream. He was drenched in perspiration. Shishi was sitting alone in the lamplight.

“Where was I just now?” he asked.

“Why, you've been lying on the bed, Sire.”

He told her of his strange dream, and she said: “The righteous become saints when they expire. Can it be that Song Jiang really has died and appeared to you in a dream?”

“I'll certainly inquire about this. If it's true, I'll have a temple built in his memory and give him a posthumous title.”

“A good idea. It will show that Your Majesty does not forget your meritorious officials.”

The emperor sighed much that night.

The next morning he summoned his ministers to the palace. Cai Jing, Tong Guan, Gao Qiu and Yang Jian, afraid he would question them about Song Jiang, left the moment the imperial court was concluded. Only Marshal Su and a few other high officials remained waiting for an audience.

“Have you any news of Song Jiang, Governor of Chuzhou?” the sovereign asked Su.

“No news, Sire, but last night I had a peculiar dream.”

“Tell me about it.”

“I dreamt that Song Jiang came to my home dressed in his usual armor and helmet. He said he had died from poisoned wine Your Majesty had sent him. Sympathizing with his righteous loyalty, the people of Chuzhou buried him above Liao Er Flats outside the South Gate of the city and built a shrine where they sacrifice to him.”

The emperor shook his head. “Very strange. I had the same dream.” And he said to the marshal: “Send someone you trust to find out whether this is true, and report back to me immediately.”

Su dispatched a man as directed.

The next day, the monarch sat in his Hall of Culture and Virtue. Gao Qiu and Yang Jian were present.

“Have your ministries any news of Song Jiang?” he asked them.

They dared not reply truthfully. Both said they did not know. Suspicious, the emperor had an uncomfortable feeling.

Marshal Su's man returned from Chuzhou. He said that Song Jiang had died of drinking poisoned imperial wine, that the people, respecting his loyalty to the emperor, had buried him on high ground above Liao Er Flats. Moreover, Wu Yong, Hua Rong and Li Kui were interred there with him. Local citizens, out of pity, had built a shrine to his memory. They sincerely worshipped there, and their prayers were always answered.

Su hastily led his emissary before the emperor in the palace. The man repeated his story. The sovereign was stricken with grief.

At his imperial court the next day he was very angry. He berated Gao and Yang in the presence of all his officials.

“Traitorous liars, would you ruin my empire!”

Falling to their knees the two kowtowed and begged forgiveness. Cai and Tong spoke up on their behalf.

“Life and death are pre-ordained. The ministries have received no official notification, so they dared not report. As a matter of fact, they didn't know. A document arrived from Chuzhou only last night. They were intending to report to you this morning, Sire. They were just waiting for you to ask.”

Again the monarch was deceived by the four rogues, and their crimes were concealed. He shouted for Gao and Yang to withdraw, and directed that the emissary who delivered the wine be produced. But the fellow had unexpectedly died on the return trip from Chuzhou.

The next day Marshal Su called on the sovereign and related how Song Jiang had become a saint, and how efficaciously he responded to the prayers of the people. The emperor ordered that Song Qing carry on his brother's rank and office. But the younger man was suffering from rheumatism and could not assume the duties. He sent a reply of thanks and regrets, saying he wanted only to remain in Yuncheng and farm the family estate.

Sympathizing with Qing's filial sentiments, the sovereign made him a gift of a hundred thousand strings of cash and three thousand *mu* of land. He decreed that if Qing had a son he would be given an official post. In subsequent years Qing's son Song Anping, after qualifying in the imperial examinations, was appointed a secretary scholar. But that was later.

At Marshal Su's request, the emperor conferred on Song Jiang the posthumous title of Loyal, Chivalrous and Efficacious Duke, and authorized funds for the construction of a temple dedicated to his memory in Liangshan Marsh. In the main building, statues were placed of Song Jiang and the other chieftains who died for the empire. The monarch personally wrote the words for the name plaque— *Loyalty Temple*. On receipt of the imperial funds, Jizhou Prefecture immediately started construction.

Song Jiang's spirit appeared frequently in Liangshan Marsh, and the people sacrificed to him constantly. When they prayed for wind they got wind, when they prayed for rain they got rain.

He appeared too in Liao Er Flats. There the people also built a large temple, with two wings. They petitioned for and received an imperial donation. In the main hall they installed statues of the thirty-six senior chieftains. In the wings they put statues of their seventy-two lieutenants, plus figures of servants. People came from near and far to worship, and their prayers were always answered.

Those who defend their country and protect the people have incense burned to their memories for ten thousand years. Sacrifices are made to them for generation after generation. They bring to their worshippers security and peace. In response to prayers they bestow riches and prosperity.

Remains of these ancient sites still exist to this day.